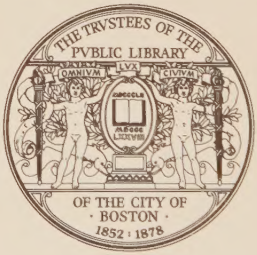
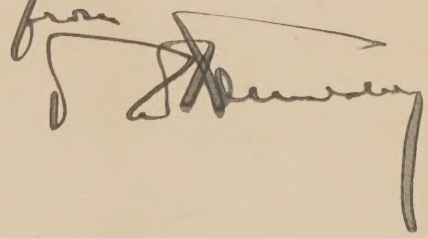
THE LATE MATTIA PASCAL

LUIGI PIRANDELLO

Boston
Public Library



Purchased with State Funds

To David Nielsen
with best Christmas
greetings from

1921

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/latemattiapascal0000luig_g7m8

THE LATE
MATTIA PASCAL

BY LUIGI PIRANDELLO

THREE PLAYS

Six Characters in Search of an Author

"Henry IV"

Right You Are! (If You Think So)

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

THE LATE MATTIA PASCAL

(*IL FU MATTIA PASCAL*)

BY

LUIGI PIRANDELLO

Translated from the Italian by
ARTHUR LIVINGSTON

NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
681 FIFTH AVENUE

Copyright, 1923
By E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

All rights reserved

First Printing - - - July, 1923
Second Printing - - Nov., 1923

Printed in the United States of America

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

SHALL we say that the theatre of Pirandello is a higher and more perfect expression of his peculiar art than his tales or his novels? That has been said. And a certain body of fact is there to support such a contention. It is Pirandello's drama that has won him world-wide recognition, whereas his prose work, though for thirty years it has held him in a high position in Italian letters, remained national in circulation and even in Italy was the delight of an elect few. Many of his comedies, besides, are reworkings of his short stories; as though he himself regarded the latter as incomplete expressions of the vision they contained. In the third place, one might say that since the novelty of Pirandello's art consists rather in his method of dissecting life than in his judgment of life, his geometrical, symmetrical, theorematic situations are more vivid in the clashing dialogue of people on a stage than in the less animated form of prose narrative.

These considerations do not all apply, however, to "The Late Mattia Pascal."

That we have a first class drama in this novel is evident from the fact that Pirandello himself used the amusing situation in the first part of the story as the theme of one of his Sicilian comedies: "Liolà"; and

in a more important sense the book as a whole is to be counted among the sources that have inspired the "new" theatre in Italy. Chiarelli's "The Mask and the Face" was a play that "made a school"; and that school, the "grotesque," may be thought of as an offspring of "The Late Mattia Pascal." The novel, also, falls naturally into a special place in the repertory of Pirandello's more characteristic themes. It is a variation of the situation in "Henry IV"—where the mask, the fiction, is first offered by circumstances, then deliberately assumed, to be violently torn off in the case of Mattia Pascal, to be retained and utilized in the case of "Henry IV."

But "The Late Mattia Pascal" has this advantage over the Pirandello play: that whereas the latter, from the conditions of stage production, must show a situation cut out from life and given an almost artificial independence of its own, the novel presents the whole picture. It has leisure to demonstrate how the fiction grows out of life, how, if it be deliberately assumed, any one would, naturally and logically, have so assumed it. And it shows, besides, some of the effects of the fiction on character: if Adriano Meis cannot escape wholly from Mattia Pascal, neither can Mattia Pascal escape wholly from Adriano Meis. The novel, in a word, possesses intrinsically that humanity, that humanness, which the Pirandello play more often suggests than contains.

It is curious to note, however, that if "The Late Mattia Pascal," despite the fact that it was written twenty years ago, has entered into the patrimony of the "new" (the post-war) literature of Italy, that rejuvenation (rejuvenation rather than revival) has been

due not to Pirandello's dramatic successes but to other influences. When we say "D'Annunzianism," the term conveys a note of disparagement to D'Annunzio that is not intended. The disparagement is aimed at the imitators of an art, which, in its own time, was new and which in its own domain was original. Nevertheless religions are rarely destroyed without some attacks upon the idols that symbolize them, and without the erection of new idols in the places of the old. Pirandello (along with Verga who did not live to enjoy it, along with Oriani, along with Manzoni—real revivals, these last two) has profited by the reaction against the literature of "bravura"; and of his works the one that has gained most is "The Late Mattia Pascal."

These young Italians are doing many interesting things in many fields! They are asking their rulers to govern, their priests to pray, their teachers to teach, their workmen to work, and their writers—to say something. The new vogue of "The Late Mattia Pascal" rests on the fact that it says something, and says something in such a way that the novel remains interesting because of what it says, and not only because of the way it says it. "The Late Mattia Pascal" is a compact, carefully developed novel, with two good stretches of story-telling, each equipped with a psychological preparation worked out to the last detail. It has a big idea, exemplified in characters skilfully chosen and consistently evolved on the background of their particular environment. It is a work accordingly universal in its bearing, but specific in the milieu it describes.

One or two things in this milieu may seem exotic to an American. The self-expressiveness, on occasion, of Marianna Dondi-Pescatore might appear overdrawn to

some of us—though it is not. We have to remember, again, that there is no divorce in Italy; that therefore Mattia Pascal cannot be free of Romilda Pescatore; that, therefore, Adriano Meis cannot marry Adriana Paleari. We have to remember, finally, that life in over-populated Europe is based on the defensive principle; that a man is guilty until proved innocent; that unless his papers are in order, unless he can tell who he is, where he came from, and why he came from there, he cannot find employment, transact business, or establish social connections of any important kind. Some critics may not agree with Pirandello in his attitude toward the episode —that trick, for which he is sometimes accused, of laughing at his audiences—arousing interest in situations out of which nothing comes. The criticism of such devices, if criticism there be, is, however, that they show excess, rather than lack, of technique. How many producers, for example, have not suggested an "ending" to "Right You Are" ("Così e se vi pare")—only an afterthought revealing that no ending is the most powerful ending of them all!

The reserve and simplicity of Pirandello's language —a language "de-regionalized" and slightly colored with a flat and unpretentious classicism—are of no great consolation to a translator. Pirandello ought to be clever when he isn't; and the fact that he isn't gives a tartness, a sharpness, a chuckle to the mood of his sentence before which, I confess, I throw up my hands. This man, Pascal, is always smiling at himself, however benevolently he smiles at other people. Adriano Meis, perhaps, is more plain and matter of fact. I note the detail simply to point out that there is a slight differentiation in manner in the two parts of the book—the

career of Adriano Meis being enclosed, as it were, by the jest of Mattia Pascal and the outcome of that jest.

I have suppressed a few paragraphs—details of Mattia Pascal's education in poetry; characterizations, at Monte Carlo, of people not otherwise figuring in the story; the analysis of the style of Lodoletta's obituary. I have adapted one or two scenes where a pun compelled a detour; I have given, for special reasons, a new ending to the episode of the wedding ring. Otherwise the rendering should be fairly exact, though not by any means literal.

I have taken over with some liberty the unsyntactical "free" sentence—so characteristically Italian, since the syntax is supplied by the "acting"—by gesture and facial expression. This free sentence is, however, a native property of our own language, though I don't know how many generations of grammarians have tried to rob us of it.

A. L.

CONTENTS

		PAGE
TRANSLATOR'S NOTE		v
A PIRANDELLO PREFACE		xiii
CHAPTER		
I.	"MY NAME IS MATTIA PASCAL"	1
II.	"GO TO IT," SAYS DON ELIGIO	4
III.	A MOLE SAPS OUR HOUSE	9
IV.	JUST AS IT WAS	21
V.	HOW I WAS RIPENED	44
VI.	. . . CLICK, CLICK, CLICK, CLICK	67
VII.	I CHANGE CARS	86
VIII.	ADRIANO MEIS	103
IX.	CLOUDY WEATHER	123
X.	A FONT AND AN ASH-TRAY	136
XI.	NIGHT . . . AND THE RIVER	154
XII.	PAPIANO GETS MY EYE	181
XIII.	THE RED LANTERN	201
XIV.	MAX TURNS A TRICK	220
XV.	I AND MY SHADOW	234
XVI.	MINERVA'S PICTURE	253
XVII.	REINCARNATION	283
XVIII.	THE LATE MATTIA PASCAL	299

A PIRANDELLO PREFACE

[Appendix to the 1921 (the Mondadori) Edition of "Il fu Mattia Pascal"]

ACCORDING to the morning papers of New York, January 25, 1921, Mr. Albert Heintz of Buffalo, having to choose between his love for his wife and his love for a second young lady, conceives the notion of inviting the two women to a conference with him that some decision may be arrived at in the matter.

The women meet with him, according to plan, and after a long discussion, an agreement is reached: all three decide to commit suicide.

Mrs. Heintz goes home and shoots herself.

Whereupon Mr. Heintz and the young lady discover that on the death of the wife all obstacles to their happiness have been removed. They conclude that it is wiser not to commit suicide, as they had arranged, but to get married instead. The police think differently, however, and the couple is arrested.

A commonplace solution to an interesting situation!

* * * * *

Suppose now some unlucky author were to think of putting such a situation into a novel or a play.

We may be sure that his first care would be to devise ways and means, even drastic ways and means, for correcting the absurdity of Mrs. Heintz's suicide, for making it seem natural and logical in some way or other.

But we may be equally sure that, however ingenious he might be, ninety-nine critics out of every hundred would still declare the suicide absurd and the work unconvincing.

The reason is that Life, despite its brazen absurdities, little and big, has the invaluable privilege of dispensing with that idiotic verisimilitude to which Art believes itself in duty bound to defer. The absurdities of Life need not look plausible for the simple reason that they are true, whereas the absurdities of Art, to seem true, must be careful to appear plausible; and plausible as they now become, they cease to be absurdities.

A situation in life may be absurd. A work of art, if it is really a work of art, may not.

It follows that to call a work of art absurd and improbable in terms of life is sheer nonsense. We may call it such in terms of art, but in terms of art only.

* * * * *

In the world of natural history there is a Kingdom reserved for zoology because it is inhabited by animals.

Among the animals which so inhabit it is man.

And the zoologist may talk of man and say, for example, that man is not a quadruped but a biped, and that he does not have the tail that the monkey, the donkey, or the peacock has.

This "man" of which the zoologist speaks can never be so unfortunate as to lose, let us say, a leg and replace it with a wooden one; or to lose an eye and replace it

with a glass one. The zoologist's man always has two legs, of which neither is of wood; and always two eyes, of which neither is of glass.

And we cannot argue with this zoologist. For if we confront him with Mr. A. who has a wooden leg, or a glass eye, he answers that he does not know the gentleman, because Mr. A. is not "man" but "a man."

It is true that we, in our turn, can retort to the zoologist that the "man" he knows does not exist, but that individual men do exist, and may even have wooden legs and glass eyes.

We may ask at this point whether certain commentators regard themselves as zoologists or as literary critics when, in reviewing a novel, or a short-story, or a comedy, they condemn this or that character, this or that situation, this or that motive, not in terms of art, as would be proper, but in terms of a humanity which they seem to know to perfection, as though it really existed outside that infinite variety of individuals who are in a position to commit the above mentioned absurdities—absurdities which do not need to seem logical and natural because they are true.

In my own experience with such criticism I have observed one curious thing: that whereas the zoologist understands that man is distinguished from other animals by the fact, among others, that he can think while animals cannot, these critics regard thinking—the trait most distinctive of mankind, that is—not, if you please, as an excess, but rather as a downright lack of humanity in many of my not over-cheerful characters. "Humanity" would seem, in their view, to reside rather in feeling than in reasoning.

But—if I may be permitted a generality in my turn

—is it not true that a man never thinks so hard (I don't say, so well) as when he is unhappy and in distress, precisely because he is determined to discover why he is unhappy, who is responsible for his being so, and whether he deserves it all? Whereas, when he is happy, when everything is going well with him, he does not reason at all, accepting his good fortune as though it were his due.

It is the lot of the lower animals to suffer without thinking. But for these critics, a man who is unhappy and thinks (thinks—because he is unhappy) is not "human"; from which it would follow that a man cannot suffer unless he is a beast, and that only when he is a beast can he be "human."

* * * * *

But recently I have found a critic to whom I am very grateful. In connection with the "unhuman" and it would seem incurable "cerebrality"—in connection with the paradoxical "implausibility"—of my plots and my characters, he has asked such critics how they arrive at their criteria for so judging the world of my art.

"From 'normal life,' so-called?" he asks. "But what is normal life but a system of relationships which we select from the chaos of daily happenings and arbitrarily call 'normal'?" And he concludes that "the world of an artist can be judged only by criteria derived from that world itself."

To remove any suspicion that I am praising this critic because he praises me, I hasten to add that in spite of this view of his, in fact because of this view of his, he is inclined to judge my work unfavorably; for he thinks that I fail to give a universally human value and

a universally human significance to my plots and my people; so much so, that he is not sure whether I have not deliberately confined myself to the portrayal of certain curious individualities, certain psychological situations of a very special, a very particular, scope.

But supposing it should prove that the universally human value and significance of some of my plots and of some of my people, in the conflict, as he puts it, between reality and illusion, between the individual aspect and the social reflection of this aspect, resides, in the first instance, in the significance and value we must assign to that primal conflict—which, through the irony of Life, is always and inevitably found to have been an insubstantial one? (For—necessarily, alas!—every reality of today is bound to prove an illusion tomorrow, a necessary illusion, indeed, since outside of it there is no reality for us.) Supposing, again, that the same universally human import should prove to reside in this fact: that a man or a woman, placed by themselves or by forces outside themselves, in a painful situation which is socially abnormal and as absurd as you care to make it, remain in that situation, endure it, "act" it out before others, only so long as they fail, whether through blindness or incredible good faith, to recognize it? (Because the moment they do so recognize it, as in a mirror placed before their eyes, they refuse to endure it any longer; they realize all the horror there is in it; and they rectify it, or, failing in the attempt to do so, succumb to it.) Supposing, finally, it should reside in this further fact: that a socially abnormal situation may be accepted, even though it be thus revealed in a mirror (which in this case would be presenting our illusion itself to our eyes), and then we continue to "act" it,

submitting to all the horror it involves, so long as we can do so behind the breath-stifling mask which we (or other people or cruel circumstances) have placed upon our faces—until, that is, under this mask, some feeling of ours is so deeply hurt that we at last rebel, tear off the mask, hurl it aside, and trample it under foot?

"Then suddenly," says my critic, "a flood of humanity engulfs these characters: these marionettes become creatures of flesh and blood, and words that burn the soul and wrench the heart pour from their lips!"

Yes, assuredly!—Because these characters have now discovered their own particular individual faces hitherto concealed under the masks they have been wearing, masks which made these people marionettes in the hands of themselves or of other people, rendering them hard, wooden, angular, without finish, without delicacy, complicated, out of plumb, as everything must be when, not freely but of violent necessity, it is forced into an abnormal, an improbable, a paradoxical situation,—a situation, in their case, so abnormal, so improbable, so paradoxical that at last they have been able to endure it no longer, and have smashed their way out of it back to "normality."

The mix-up, if mix-up there be, is accordingly deliberate; the mechanism, if mechanism there be, is accordingly deliberate; but it is so willed not by me, but by the story, by the characters themselves. And there is no attempt to conceal it, either. Often the cogs are fitted together—deliberately fitted together—in plain view, so that we can see how the machine is made: it is a mask for the playing of a part. It is an interplay of rôles; what we would like to be (or what

we ought to be); what other people think us to be; while what we really are we do not, up to a certain point, know even ourselves. It is an awkward, hesitant, uncertain metaphor of our real personality. It is a fiction (often childishly artificial) which we build up about our real life, or which others build up about us. At any rate, it is a real mechanism in which each, deliberately I repeat, makes a marionette of himself; until at last, in disgust, he sends the whole thing flying with a kick!

I believe I need now go no farther than to congratulate my own inventiveness, if, with all its scruples, it has revealed as real defects the defects which it has deliberately created—defects of that factitious illusion which the characters themselves have set up about their own lives, or which others have built up about them; the defects, in short, that the mask has until it is torn off.

* * * * *

But a greater consolation still has come to me from Life (from the daily papers, to be exact) some twenty years after the first publication of "The Late Mattia Pascal."

This story too, in spite of the gratifying commendation with which it was received, was also regarded by some people as "implausible," if not "impossible."

Well, Life has furnished me the proof of its essential verity, and with a surprising fullness even in minute details which I had thought out by myself in creating it in my own mind.

I quote from an evening paper of Milan (the *Corriere della Sera*), under date of March 20, 1920:

"A LIVING MAN VISITS HIS OWN GRAVE!"

"A remarkable case of bigamy, deriving from the alleged death of a husband, has just been reported from the Calvairate district. On Dec. 26, 1916, some peasants discovered the corpse of a man floating in the so-called Five-Dam Canal. He was dressed in a brown sweater and a pair of brown trousers.

"The matter was reported to the police, who started an investigation. The body was shortly identified by a certain Maria Tedeschi (a good-looking woman of about forty), by a certain Luigi Longoni, and by a certain Luigi Maioli, as that of the Tedeschi woman's husband, an electrician by trade, named Ambrose Casati, son of Luigi Casati, born in 1869. In fact, the description of the corpse tallied closely with that of Casati.

"It is now apparent, however, that this identification was not wholly disinterested, at least as regards the man Maioli and the Tedeschi woman. The real Casati was alive all the time. However, on Feb. 21, 1915, he had been convicted of some crime against property and sent to prison. Before that he had not been living with his wife, although no legal separation had been obtained.

"After seven months of widowhood, the Tedeschi woman was married to Maioli, without encountering any difficulties whatever at the license bureau.

"Casati was released from prison on March 8, 1917; but not till a few days ago did he discover that he was 'dead,' that his wife had married again and disappeared. The discovery also was quite accidental. Casati needed some document or other and went to the Hall of Records in *Piazza Missori* for the certificates of his 'civil status.' The clerk at the window observed, however:

" 'But you are dead, my dear Mr. Casati. Your legal residence is the Musocco Cemetery, city lot 44, grave 550.'

"Casati's protests were quite in vain.

"He must now take legal steps to have his 'resurrection' verified by a court, so that his record with the City registrar may be brought up to date. Such action on his part will automatically annul the second marriage of his 'widow.'

"Casati was not at all downcast over his strange predicament. He took the thing as a joke; and to enjoy the situation to the full, he visited the Musocco Cemetery to honor his own memory; and while there, even laid a bouquet and lighted a votive candle on his own grave!"

A man drowned in a canal! The corpse discovered, and later identified by the wife and the person she is later to marry! The return of the dead man to his home town; and even a visit to his own grave!

All the data of fact, in short, though of course without any of the things essential to giving the situation a "universally human value and significance"!

I cannot, of course, presume that the electrician, Mr. Ambrose Casati, had been reading my novel, and that he laid flowers on his own grave in imitation of the late Mattia Pascal!

Life, at any rate, with a delightful contempt for plausibility and probability, was able to find a Government Bureau willing to issue a license to Mr. Maioli and Mrs. Casati, and to find a clergyman willing to unite the couple in marriage, without taking the trouble to verify something that might easily have been ascertained: namely that the husband, Mr. Casati, was in a prison and not in a grave.

No novelist would ever dare allow himself to be so careless! But now it is a satisfaction for me, as I think of the charges of improbability levelled against my novel, to point out the real implausibilities of which Life itself is sometimes guilty, even in novels which, unwittingly, it plagiarizes from Art.

THE LATE
MATTIA PASCAL

THE LATE MATTIA PASCAL

I

"My Name is Mattia Pascal"

ONE of the few things, in fact about the only thing I was sure of was my name: Mattia Pascal. Of this I took full advantage also. Whenever one of my friends or acquaintances so far lost his head as to come and ask me for a bit of advice on some matter of importance, I would shrug my shoulders, squint my eyes, and answer:

"My name is Mattia Pascal!"

"That's very enlightening, old man! I knew that much already!"

"And you don't feel lucky to know that much?"

There was no reason why he should that I could see. But at the time I had not realized what it meant not to be sure of even that much—not to be able to answer on occasion, as I had formerly answered:

"My name is Mattia Pascal!"

Some people surely will sympathize with me (sympathy comes cheap) when they try to imagine the immense anguish a poor man must feel on suddenly discovering . . . well, yes . . . just a blank; that he knows

neither who his father was, nor who his mother was, nor how, nor when, nor where, he was born—if ever he was born at all. . . . Just as others will be ready to criticize (criticism comes cheaper still) the immorality and viciousness of a society where an innocent child can be treated that way.

Very well! Thanks for the sympathy and the holy horror! But it is my duty to give notice in advance that it's not quite that way. Indeed, if need should arise, I could give my family tree with the origin and descent of all my house. I could prove that I know my father and my mother, and their fathers and mothers unto several generations, and the doings, through the years, of all those forebears of mine (doings not always to their untarnished credit, I must confess).

Well then?

Well then! It's this way. My case, not the ordinary one, by any means, is so far out of the ordinary in fact, that I have decided to recount it.

For some two years I held a position—mouse-catcher and custodian in one—in the so-called Boccamazza library. Away back in the year 1803, a certain Monsignor Boccamazza, on departing from this life, left his books as a legacy to our village. It was always clear to me that this venerable man of the cloth knew nothing whatever about the dispositions of his fellow-citizens. I suppose he hoped that his benefaction, as time and opportunity favored, would kindle a passion for study in their souls. So far not a spark has ever glowed therein, as I may state with some authority, and with the idea of paying a compliment, rather than not, to my fellow-townsmen. Indeed, our village so little appreciated the gift of the reverend Boccamazza that it has,

to this day, refused money even for putting his head, neck, and shoulders into marble; and for years and years the books he left were never removed from the damp and musty store house where they had been piled after his funeral. Eventually, however, they were transported (and imagine in what condition!) to the unused Church of Santa Maria Liberale, a building which, for some reason or other, had been secularized. There the town government entrusted them to any one of its favorites who was looking for a sinecure and who, for two lire a day, was willing to care for them (or to neglect them if he chose), and to stand the noxious odor of all that mildewed paper.

This plum, in the course of human events, fell to me, and I must add that the first day of my incumbency gave me such a distaste for books and manuscripts in general (some of those under my charge were very precious, I am told) that I should never, never, of my own accord, have thought of increasing the number of them in the world by one. But, as I said, my case is a very strange one; and I now agree that it may prove of interest to some chance reader, who, in fulfillment of Monsignor Boccamazza's pious hope, shall some day wander into the library and stumble upon this manuscript of mine. For I am leaving it to the foundation, with the understanding that no one shall open it till fifty years after my *third, last and final* death.

There you have it, exactly! So far I have died twice (and the Lord knows the extent of my regret, I can assure you): the first time I died by mistake; and the second time I died . . . but that's my story, as you will see.

II

"Go to It," Says Don Eligio

THE idea, or rather the suggestion, that I write such a book came to me from my reverend friend, Don Eligio Pellegrinotto, the present custodian of the Boccamazza gift; and to his care (or neglect) I shall entrust the script when it is finished (if ever I reach the end).

I am writing it here in this little deconsecrated church, under the pale light shed from the windows of the cupola, here in the librarian's "office" (one of the old shrines in the apse, fenced off by a wooden railing), where Don Eligio sits, panting at the task he has heroically assumed of bringing a little order into this chaos of literature.

I doubt whether he gets very far with it.

Beyond a cursory glance over the ensemble of the bindings, no one before his time ever took the trouble to find out just what kind of books the old Monsignore's legacy contained (we took it for granted that they bore mostly on religion). Well, Don Eligio has discovered ("Just my luck!" says he) that their subject-matter is extremely varied on the contrary; and since they were gathered up haphazard, just as they lay in the store house, and set on the shelves wherever they would fit, the confusion they are in is, to say the least, appalling. Odd marriages have resulted between some of these old

volumes. Don Eligio tells me, that it took him a whole forenoon to divorce one pair of books that had embraced each other by their bindings: "The Art of Courting Fair Ladies," by Anton Muzio Porro (Perugia, 1571); and (Mantua, 1625), "The Life and Death of the Beatified Faustino Materucci"! (One section of Muzio's treatise is devoted to the debaucheries of the Benedictine order to which the holy Faustino belonged!)

Climbing up and down a ladder he borrowed from the village lamp-lighter, Don Eligio has unearthed many interesting and curious tomes on those dust-laden shelves. Every time he finds one such, he takes careful aim from the rung where he is standing, and drops it, broadside down, on the big table in the center of the nave. The old church booms the echo from wall to wall. A cloud of dust fills the room. Here and there a spider can be seen scampering to safety on the table top. I saunter along from my writing desk, straddle the railing, and approach the table. I pick up the book, use it to crush the vermin that have been shaken out, open it at random, and glance it through.

Little by little I have acquired a liking for such browsing. Besides, Don Eligio tells me I should model my style on some of the mouldy texts he is exhuming here—give it a "classic flavor" as he says. I shrug my shoulders and remark that such things are beyond me. Then my eye falls on something curious, and I read on.

When at last, grimy with dust and sweat, Don Eligio comes down from his ladder, I join him for a breath of clean air in the garden which he has somehow coaxed into luxuriance on a patch of gravel in the corner of apse and nave.

I sit down on a projection of the underpinning, and

rest my chin on the handle of my cane. Don Eligio is softening the ground about a head of lettuce.

"Dear me, dear me," say I. "These are not the times to be writing books, Don Eligio, even fool books like mine. Of literature I must begin to say what I have said of everything else: 'Curses on Copernicus!' "

"Oh, wait now," exclaims Don Eligio, the blood rushing to his face as he straightens up from his cramped position. (It is hot at noon time, and he has put on a broad-brimmed straw, for a bit of artificial shade.) "What has Copernicus got to do with it?"

"More than you realize, perhaps; for, in the days before the earth began to go round the sun. . . ."

"There you go again! It always went round the sun, man alive. . . ."

"Not at all, not at all! No one knew it did; so, to all intents and purposes, it might as well have been sitting still. Plenty of people don't admit even now that the earth goes round the sun. I mentioned the point to an old peasant the other day, and do you know what he said to me? He said: 'That's a good excuse when someone swears you're drunk!' Even you, a good priest, dare not doubt that in Joshua's time the sun did the moving. But that's neither here nor there. I was saying that in days when the earth stood still, and Man, dressed as Greek or Roman, had a reason for thinking himself about the most important thing in all creation, there was some justification for a fellow's putting his own paltry story into writing."

"The fact remains," says Don Eligio, "that more trashy books have been written since the earth, as you insist, began going round the sun, than there were before that time."

"I agree," say I. " 'At half past eight, to the minute, the count got out of bed and entered his bathroom. . . .' 'The millionaire's wife was wearing a low-necked gown with frills. . . .' 'They were sitting opposite each other at a breakfast table in the Ritz. . . .' 'Lucretia was sewing at the window in the front room. . . .' So they write nowadays. Trash, I grant you! But that's not the question either. Are we, or are we not, stuck here on a sort of top which some God is spinning for his amusement—a sunbeam maybe for a string; or, if you wish, on a mudball that's gone crazy, and whirls round and round in space, without knowing or caring why it whirls—just for the fun of the thing? At one point in the turning we feel a little warmer; at the next a little cooler; but after fifty or sixty rounds we die, with the satisfaction of having made fools of ourselves at least once every turn. Copernicus, I tell you, Don Eligio, Copernicus has ruined mankind beyond repair. Since his day we have all come gradually to realize how unutterably insignificant we are in the whole scheme of things—less than nothing at all, despite the pride we take in our science and the inventiveness of the human mind. Well, why get excited over our little individual trials and troubles, if a catastrophe involving thousands of us is as important, relatively, as the destruction of an ant-hill?"

Don Eligio observes, however, that no matter how hard we try to disparage or destroy the many illusions Nature has planted in us for our good, we never quite succeed. Fortunately man's attention is very easily diverted from his low estate.

And he is right. I have noticed that in our village, on certain nights marked in the calendar, the street

lamps are not lighted; and on such occasions, if the weather happens to be cloudy, we are left in the dark. —Proof, I take it, that even in this day and age, we fancy that the moon is put there to give us light by night, just as the sun is put there to give us light by day (with the stars thrown in for decorative purposes). And we are only too glad to forget what ridiculously small mites we are, provided now and then we can enjoy a little flattery of and from each other. Men are capable of fighting over such trifles as land or money, experiencing the greatest joy and the greatest sorrow over things, which, were we really awake to our nothingness, would surely be deemed the most miserable trivialities.

To come to the point: Don Eligio seems to me so nearly right, that I have decided to avail myself of this faculty I share with other men for thinking myself worth talking about; and, in view of the strangeness of my experience, as I said, I am going to write it down. I shall be brief, on the whole, sticking closely to essentials; and I shall be frank. Many of the things I shall narrate will not help my reputation much. But I find myself in a quite exceptional position: as a person beyond this life. There is no reason, therefore, for concealing or mitigating anything.

So I proceed.

III

A Mole Saps Our House

I WAS a bit hasty in stating, a moment ago, that I knew my father. I can hardly claim as much. He died when I was four years old. He went on a trip to Corsica in the coaster of which he was captain and owner, and never came back—a matter of typhus, I believe, which carried him off in three days at the untimely age of thirty-eight. Nevertheless he left his family well provided for—his wife, that is, and two boys: Mattia (I that was in my first life), and Roberto, my elder by a couple of years.

The old people of our village enjoy telling a story to the effect that my father's wealth had a rather dubious origin (though I don't see why they continue to hold that up against him, since the property has long since passed from our hands). As they will have it, he got his money at a game of cards with the captain of an English tramp-steamer visiting Marseilles. The Englishman had taken on a cargo at some port in Sicily, a load of sulphur, it is specified, consigned to a merchant in Liverpool. (They know all the details, you see: Liverpool! Give them time to think and they'll tell you the name of the merchant and the street he lived on!) After losing to my father the large amount of cash he had on hand, the captain staked the sulphur

—and again lost. The steamer arrived in Liverpool still further lightened by the weight of its master, who had jumped overboard at sea in despair. (Had it not been so well ballasted with the lies of my father's defamers, I dare say the ship would never have reached port at all!)

Our fortune was mostly in landed property. An adventurer of a roving disposition, my father was utterly unable to tie himself down to a business in one place. With his boat we went around from harbor to harbor buying here and selling there, dealing in goods of every sort. But to avoid the temptation of too hazardous speculations, he always invested his profits in fields and houses about our native town; intending, I suppose, to settle down there in his old age, and enjoy, with his wife and children about him, the fruits of his imagination and hard work.

He bought—oh, he bought a place called *Le Due Riviere*—"Shoreacres," as it were, for its olives and its mulberry trees; he bought a farm we called "The Coops," with a pond on it, which ran a mill; he bought the whole hillside of "The Spur"—the best vineyard in our district; he bought the San Rocchino estate, where he built a delightful summer-house; in town he bought the mansion where we lived, two tenement houses, and the building that has now been fixed over for the armory.

His sudden death was the ruin of us. Utterly ignorant of business matters, my mother was obliged to entrust our fortune to someone. She chose as her steward a man who had been enriched by my father and who, as anyone would have thought, would be loyal out of sheer gratitude, if for nothing else; all the more since

a high salary for his services would make honesty a good policy also. A saintly soul, my mother was! Naturally timid and retiring, as trustful as a child, she knew nothing at all about this world and the people who live in it. After my father's death her health was never good; but she did not complain of her troubles to other people; and I doubt whether she lamented them much in her secret heart. She seemed to take them as a natural consequence of her great sorrow. The shock of that should have killed her—so she reasoned. Ought she not be thankful therefore to the good Lord who had vouchsafed her a few years more of life—be it indeed in pain and suffering—to devote to her children?

For us she had an almost morbid tenderness, full of worries and fancied terrors. She would scarcely let us out of her sight, for fear of losing us. Let her look up from her work to find one of us absent, and the servants would be sent calling through the great mansion where we lived (the monument to my father's ambition) to bring us back to her side.

Merging her whole existence in that of her husband, she felt lost in the world when he was gone. She never left the house except on Sundays—and then only to attend early mass in a church near by, in company with two maids of long service with us whom she treated as members of the family. Indeed, to simplify her life still further, she lived in three rooms of our big house, abandoning the others to the haphazard care of the maids and to the pranks of us two boys.

I can still feel the impressiveness of those mysterious halls and chambers, all pretentiously furnished with massive antiques. The faded tapestries and upholstering gave off that peculiar odor of mustiness which is

the breath, as it were, of ages that have died. More than once, I remember, I would look around, in strange consternation, upon those weirdly silent objects which had been sitting there for years and years motionless and unused!

Among my mother's more frequent visitors was an aunt of mine on my father's side—Scolastica by name, a bilious, irritable old maid, tall, dark-skinned, stern of bearing, and with eyes like a ferret. Scolastica never stayed long at any one time. Invariably her visits ended in a quarrel which she would settle by stalking out of the house, without saying goodbye to anyone, and slamming the doors behind her. I was terribly afraid of this redoubtable woman. I would sit in my chair without daring to stir, gazing at her with wide-opened eyes; especially when she would fly into a temper, turn furiously upon my mother, and stamping angrily on the floor, exclaim:

"Do you hear that? Hollow, hollow, underneath! Ah, that mole! That mole!"

"That mole," was Battista Malagna, the man in charge of our property, who, according to Scolastica, was boring the ground away beneath our feet. My aunt, as I learned years later, wanted mother to marry again at all costs. Ordinarily, the relatives of a dead husband do not give advice like this. But Scolastica had a severe and spiteful sense of the fitness of things. Her desire to thwart a thief, rather than any real affection for us, moved her to protest against Malagna's robbing us with impunity. Since mother was blind to faults in anybody, Scolastica saw no possible remedy except bringing a new man into the house. And she had even

picked her man—a poor devil, though a rich one, named Gerolamo Pomino.

Pomino was a widower with one boy. (The boy, also a Gerolamo, is still living; in fact he is a friend,—I can hardly say a relative—of mine, as my story will show in due season. In those days Gerolamino, or "Mino" as we called him, would come to our house along with his father, to be the torment of brother Berto and me.)

Years before, Gerolamo Pomino the elder had long aspired to the hand of my aunt Scolastica; but she had spurned him as, for that matter, she had spurned every other offer in marriage. It was not so much her lack of an impulse to love. As she put it, the faintest suspicion on her part that a husband might betray her even in his thoughts would drive her to murder, yes, to murder downright! And who ever heard of a faithful husband? All males were hypocrites, deceivers, scalawags!

"Even Pomino?"

"Well, Pomino, no!"

One exception that proved the rule! But she had found that out too late. Carefully watching all the men who had proposed to her and then married someone else, she had found them, in every case, playing tricks on their wives—discoveries that afforded her a certain ferocious satisfaction. But Pomino had always been "straight." In his case, the woman, rather, had been to blame.

"So why don't you marry him, now, Cymanthia? Oh dear me! Just because he's a widower? Just because there has been a woman in his life, and he may give her a thought now and then that might otherwise have been

for you? That's splitting things pretty fine! Besides, just look at him. You can see a mile away that he's in love; and there's no secret about who it is he wants, poor man!"

As though mother would ever have dreamed of a second marriage! A sacrilege that would have seemed in her eyes! I imagine that mother doubted, besides, whether Scolastica really meant everything she said; so when my aunt would start one of her long orations on the virtures of Pomino, mother would just laugh in her peculiar way. The widower was often present at such arguments. And I can remember him hitching about uncomfortably on his chair as Scolastica would overwhelm him in words of extravagant praise, and trying to relieve his torture by the most wicked of his oaths: "The dear Lord save us!" (Pomino was a dapper little old man with soft blue eyes. Berto and I thought there was just a suggestion of rouge on his cheeks. Certainly he was proud of keeping his hair so late in life; and he took the greatest pains in parting and brushing it. As he talked, he was continually smoothing it with his two hands.)

I don't know how things would have turned out, had mother—not for her own sake, surely, but as a safeguard for the future of her children—taken Aunt Scolastica's advice and married Pomino. Surely nothing could have been worse than continuing with our affairs in the clutches of Malagna, "the mole." By the time Berto and I were in long trousers, most of our inheritance had dwindled away; though something was still left—enough to keep us, if not in luxury, at least free from actual need. But we were careless youngsters, with not one serious thought in our heads. Instead of

coming to the rescue of the remnants of our fortune, we persisted in the kind of life to which our mother had accustomed us as boys.

Never, for example, were we sent to school. We had a private tutor come to the house, a man called "Pinzone," from the little pointed beard he wore. (His real name was Del Cinque; but everybody called him "Pinzone," and I believe he grew so used to it that he ended by signing his name that way himself.) He was an absurdly tall and an absurdly lean fellow; and there is no telling how much taller he might have grown, had his head and neck not toppled forward from his shoulders in a stoop that became a real deformity. Another feature was an enormous Adam's apple that went up and down as he swallowed. Pinzone was always biting at his lips as though chastising a sarcastic little smile peculiar to him; a smile which, banished from his lips, managed to escape through two sharp eyes that ever showed a glittering mocking twinkle.

That pair of eyes must have seen many things in our house to which mother and we two boys were blind. But Pinzone said nothing, perhaps because it was not his place to interfere; or, as I believe more probable, because he took a vindictive pleasure in the thought of us boys being as poor as he some day. For Berto and I ragged him unmercifully. As a rule he would let us do anything we chose; but then again, as though to ease his conscience, he would tell on us at times when we least expected.

Once, I remember, mother had asked him to take us to Church. It was Easter time, and we were to prepare for Confession. Thence we were to call at Malagna's house, and express our sympathy to Signora Malagna

who was ill. Not a very exciting program for two boys our age and in such fine weather! We were hardly out of mother's hearing when we proposed a revision of the day's work. We offered Pinzone a fine lunch with wine, provided he would forget Church and Mrs. Malagna and go birdsnesting with us in the woods. There was a gleam in his eye as he accepted. He ate our lunch and did not stint his appetite; making serious inroads on our allowance for the month. Then he joined us on our escapade, hunting with us for fully three hours, helping us to climb the trees and even going up himself. On our return home, mother asked after Mrs. Malagna, and questioned us about Confession. We were thinking up something to say, when Pinzone, with the most brazen face in the world, told the whole story of our day without omitting one detail.

The punishments we inflicted for this and similar treachery never won us a decisive armistice; though the tricks we played on him were not wanting in a certain devilish ingenuity. Just before supper time, for instance, Pinzone would wait for the bell by taking a little nap on the couch in our front hall. One evening, of a wash day, when we had been put to bed early for some prank or other, we got up, filled a squirtgun with water from the wash, stealthily crept up to him, and let him have it full in the nostrils. The jump he gave took him nearly to the ceiling!

What we learned with such a teacher can readily be imagined; though it was not all his fault. Pinzone had a certain erudition, among the classic poets; and I, who was much more impressionable than Berto, managed to memorize a goodly number of verses—especially charades and the baroque poetry of old. I could recite so

many of these that mother was convinced we were both progressing very well. Aunt Scolastica, for her part, was not deceived; and she made up for the failure of her plans for Pomino, by trying to set Berto and me in order. We knew we had mother on our side, however, and paid no attention to her. So angry was she at this scorn of her interest in us that I am sure she would have given us both the thrashings of our lives had she been able ever to do so without mother's knowing. One day, when she was leaving the house in rage as usual, she happened to encounter me in one of the deserted rooms. I remember that she seized me by the chin and tightening her fingers till it hurt, she said: "Mamma's little darling! Mamma's little darling!"; then she lowered her face till her eyes were looking straight into mine; and a sort of stifled bellow escaped her: "If you were mine. . . . Oh, if you were mine. . . .!"

I can't yet understand why she had it in for me especially. I was a model pupil for Pinzone, as compared with Berto. It may have been the rather innocent face for which I have always been noted; an innocence accentuated rather than not by the pair of big round glasses they had fitted to my nose to discipline one of my eyes which preferred to choose, independently of the other, the objects it would look at.

Those glasses were the plague of my life; and the moment I escaped from the authority of my elders, I threw them away, restoring a longed-for autonomy to the oppressed member. As I viewed the matter, I was never destined to be a wonder for good looks, even with both eyes straight. Why go to all that trouble then? I was in good health! Never mind painting the lily!

By the time I was eighteen, a red curly beard had come to monopolize most of my face, to the particular disadvantage of a mere dot of a nose which tended to lose its bearings somewhere between that fullsome thicket and the spacious clearing of a rather impressive brow. How comforting it would be if we could only choose noses to match our faces! Imagine a man with an enormous proboscis quite out of keeping with lean wizened features. To such a man I would have said: "Look here, friend, you have a nose that just suits me. Let's exchange! It will be to the advantage of both of us." For that matter I could have improved in the selection of many other parts of my physique; but I soon understood that any radical betterment was out of the question. I grew reconciled to the face the Lord gave me, and dismissed the matter from my mind.

Brother Roberto, on the contrary, was not so easily distracted. As compared with me, he was a handsome well-built lad; and unfortunately he knew it. He would spend hours in front of a mirror combing his hair and dandying up in every way. He invested a mint of money in neckties, linen and other articles of dress. On one occasion he angered me with the fuss he made over a new evening suit for which he had bought a white velvet waistcoat. To spite him, I put the thing on one morning and went hunting in it.

"The Mole" meantime was not idle. Every season Malagna would come around complaining of the bad crops and getting mother's consent to a new mortgage he was forced to take out. Now it would be repairs on a building; now additional drainage for a field; now the "extravagance of the boys." A visit from him meant the certain announcement of another catastrophe.

One year a frost (as he said) ruined our olive groves on the "Shoreacres"; then the philloxera destroyed our vineyards on "The Spur." To import American roots (immune from this plague of the vines) we were obliged to sell one farm, and then a second, and then a third. Mother was sure that some day Malagna would find our pond at "The Coops" dried up! As for Berto and me, I suppose we did spend more money than was wise or necessary; but that does not alter the fact that Battista Malagna was the meanest swindler that ever disgraced the surface of this planet. Words more severe than these I could not charitably use toward a man who eventually became a relative of mine by marriage.

So long as mother was alive, Malagna allowed us to feel no discomforts. Indeed he put no limit to our caprices and expenditures. But that was just a blind to conceal the abyss into which, on my mother's death, I alone was to be plunged.

I alone . . . because Berto was shrewd enough to make a profitable marriage in good season. Whereas my marriage. . . .

"I ought to say something about my marriage, oughtn't I, Don Eligio?"

Don Eligio is up on his ladder again, continuing his inventory. He looks around and calls back:

"Your marriage? Why of course! The idea! Avoiding everything improper, to be sure. . . ."

"Improper! That's a good one! You know very well that. . . ."

Don Eligio laughs, and all this little deconsecrated church laughs with him. . . . Then he continues:

"If I were you, Signor Pascal, I'd take a peep at

Boccaccio or Bandello, in passing. . . . That would sort of get you into the spirit of the thing. . . ."

Don Eligio is always talking about the "spirit of the thing," the tone, the flavor, the style. . . . Who does he think I am? D'Annunzio? Not if I can help it! I am putting the thing down just as it was; and it's all I can do, at that. I was never cut out to be a literary fellow. . . . But having once begun my story, I may as well continue, I suppose.

IV

Just as It Was

I WAS out hunting one day, when I came upon a scarecrow in an open field. A short pudgy figure it was, stuffed with straw, and with an iron pot inverted on the upright for a hat. I stopped, as a whimsical notion suddenly flitted through my head.

"I have met you before," said I. "An old acquaintance!"

After a moment I burst out:

"Try the feel of this, Batty Malagna!"

A rusty pitchfork was lying on the ground nearby. I picked it up and ran it into the belly of the "man"; with so much zest, moreover, that the pot was almost shaken from its perch!

Yes, Batty Malagna himself; the way he looked when sweating and puffing in a long coat and a stiff hat he went walking of an afternoon! Everything was loose, baggy, slouching about Batty Malagna. His eyebrows seemed to ooze down his big fat face, just as his nose seemed to sag over an insipid mustache and goatee. His shoulders were a sort of drip from his neck, his abdomen a sort of downflow from his chest. This belly of his was balanced—precariously—on a pair of short stubby legs; and to make trousers that would fit these along with the paunch above, the tailor had to devise some-

thing extremely slack at the waist. From a distance Batty looked as though he were wearing skirts, or at least as though he were belly all the way down.

How Batty Malagna, with a face and a body like that, could be so much of a thief, I cannot imagine. I always supposed thieves had a distinctive something about their appearance or demeanor, which Batty seemed to lack. He walked with a waddle, his belly all a-shake, and his hands folded behind his back. When he talked, his voice was a kind of muffled bleat blubbering up with difficulty from the fat around his lungs. I should like really to know how he reconciled his conscience with the depredations he made upon our property! He must have had very deep and devious reasons, for it was not from lack of money that he stole. Perhaps he just had to be doing something out of the ordinary to make life interesting, poor devil.

Of one thing I am convinced: he must have suffered grievously, inside, from the lifelong affliction of a wife whose principal occupation was keeping him in his place. Batty made the mistake of choosing a woman from a social station just above his own (this was a very low one indeed.) Signora Guendolina, married to a man of her own sphere, would probably have made a passable helpmeet; but her sole service to Batty was to remind him on every possible pretext and occasion that she was of a good family and that in her circles people did so and so. So and so, accordingly, Batty tried his best to do. No bumpkin ever set out to become a "gentleman" with more studious application. But what a job it was! How it made him sweat—in summer weather!

To make matters worse, my lady Guendolina, shortly after her marriage to Malagna, developed a stomach

trouble which was destined to prove incurable; since entirely to master it required a sacrifice greater than her strength of will: abstinence, namely, from certain croquettes she knew how to make with truffles; from a number of peculiarly ingenious desserts; and, above all else, from wines. Not that she ever abused the latter! I should say not! Guendolina was a lady, and self control is a test of breeding! But a cure of the ailment in question demanded total avoidance of strong drink.

As youngsters, Berto and I were sometimes asked to stay to dinner at Malagna's house. Batty would sit down at table and pitch in, meanwhile lecturing his wife (with due regard for reprisals, of course) on the virtues of abstemiousness.

"I for my part," he would say (balancing a mouthful on his knife), "fail to see how the pleasure of tickling your palate with something you like to eat" (transferring the morsel to his mouth) "is worth buying at the price of a day in bed. There's no sense in it! I am sure that if I" (wiping his plate with a piece of bread) "gave way to my appetite like that, I should feel myself less of a man. Damn good, this sauce today, Guendolina. Think I'll try just a little more of it—just a spoonful, mind!"

"No, you shall not have another bit," his wife would snap back angrily. "The idea! I wish the Lord would give you one good cramp like those I have! That might teach you to have some regard for the woman you married!"

"Why, what in the world, Guendolina . . . ? Some regard for you?" (meanwhile pouring himself a glass of wine).

Guendolina would answer by rising from her place,

snatching the glass from his hands and emptying it . . . out of the window.

"Why . . . what's the matter? Why did you do that?"

"Because!" says Guendolina. "You know very well that wine is poison to me, poison! If you ever see me with a glass of wine—well—you just do what I did. You take it and throw it out of the window too!"

Sheepish, mortified, but making the best of it, Malagna would look first at me, then at Berto, then at the glass, then at the window.

"But, dearest, dearest, are you a child? You expect me to force you to be good? Oh, I say! You ought to be strongminded enough to control your little weaknesses."

"While you sit there enjoying yourself? While you sit there smacking your lips, holding your glass up to the light, clinking it with your spoon—just to torment me? Well, I won't stand it! That's what I get for marrying a man of your antecedents! . . ."

Well, Malagna went so far as to give up wine, to please his wife and set her a good example! I leave it to you: a man who would do that is likely to steal, just to convince himself that he amounts to something.

However, it was not long before Batty discovered that his wife was drinking behind his back; as though wine consumed in that way would not do her any harm. Whereupon Batty took to wine again himself; but at the tavern, so as not to humiliate his Guendolina by showing that he had caught her cheating. And a man who would do that . . . !

Eventual compensation for this perennial affliction Batty Malagna hoped to find in the advent of a male

heir to his family. That would be an excuse, in his own eyes and in the eyes of anybody, for all his thievery from us. What may a man not do to provide a future for his children? But his wife, instead of getting better and better, got worse and worse. Perhaps he never mentioned this burning subject to her. There were so many reasons why he should not add that worry to her troubles. Ailing, almost an invalid in the first place! Then she might die if she tried to have a child! No: God forbid! Batty would be resigned! Each of us has a cross to bear in this world!

Was Malagna quite sincere in this considerateness? If so, his conduct did not show it when Guendolina died. To be sure, he mourned her loss! Oh yes, he wept till it seemed his heart would break! And he was so thoughtful of her memory that he refused to put another "lady" in the place which she had occupied. No, no, I should say not! And he might have, you know, he might have—man in his position in town, and with plenty of money by this time! No, he married—a peasant girl, the daughter of the farmer who worked one of our estates—strong healthy thing, good-natured, good housekeeper—so that everyone could see that what he wanted was children, and the right woman to bring them up. If he waited hardly till Guendolina was cold in her grave, that was reasonable, too. Batty was getting on in years, and had no time to waste.

I had known Oliva Salvoni well since I was a little boy and she a little girl. Daughter of Pietro Salvoni (the land he worked was the farm of ours which we called "The Coops"), she had been responsible for the many hopes I had aroused in poor mother in my time—hopes that I was about to settle down and take an inter-

est in our property, even turn to farming which I had suddenly begun to like so well. Dear innocent mamma! It was, of course, my terrible Aunt Scolastica who shortly disabused her:

"But don't you see, stupid, that he's always hanging around Salvoni's?"

"Yes, why not? He's helping get the olives in!"

"Helping take an Olive in! One Olive, do you hear, cabbage-head!"

Mother gave me a scolding that she thought would last me a long long time: the mortal sin of leading a poor girl into temptation, of ruining an innocent creature I could never marry . . . that kind of talk, you understand. . . .

I listened respectfully. Really there was not the slightest danger in the world. Oliva was quite able to take care of herself: and one of her charms lay precisely in the ease and independence born of this assurance, which enabled her to avoid insipid reticences and affected modesty. How she could laugh! Such lips as hers I have never seen before nor since. And what teeth! From the lips I got not the suggestion of a kiss; from the teeth—a bite once, when I had seized her by the wrists and refused to let her go short of a caress upon her hair! That was the sum total of our intimacy.

So this was the beauty (and such a youthful, fresh and thoroughly charming beauty!) that Malagna took to wife. Oh yes, I know . . . but a girl can't turn her back on certain opportunities! She knew very well where that rascal got his money. One day, indeed, she told me exactly what she thought of him for doing it. Then later on, because of that very money, she married him. . . .

However, one year, two years, went by—and Malagna's heir was still wanting.

During the period of his first marriage Malagna had put all the blame on Guendolina and her stomach trouble; but not even now did he remotely suspect that the fault might be his own. He began to scowl and sulk at Oliva.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing!"

From the end of the third year his reproaches became quite undisguised. Soon he was actually abusing her, shouting and making scenes about the house, and claiming that she had made a show of her good health and good looks, to swindle him—a plain downright swindle, yes sir! What had he married her for? A woman of her class! Putting her in the place a lady—a real lady, sir—had held!—And if it hadn't been for that one thing, do you suppose he would ever have thought of doing such a slight to the memory of the distinguished "lady" who had been his first wife?

Poor Oliva said nothing, not knowing what there was to say, in fact. She just came to our house to tell my mother all about it; and mother would comfort her as best she could, assuring her there was still some hope, since Oliva was a mere slip of a girl. . . .

"Twenty, about?"

"Twenty-two!"

Oh, why so downhearted then? Children came sometimes, ten, fifteen, twenty years after a woman's marriage! And her husband? Malagna was getting on in years, that was true; but. . . .

Oliva, from the very first, had had her doubts, wondering whether . . . well, how should she put it? . . .

whether . . . it might not be his fault . . . there! But how prove a thing like that? Oliva was a woman of scruples. On marrying Malagna for his money and for nothing else she had determined to play absolutely fair with him . . . and she would not deceive him even for the sake of restoring peace to her household. . . .

"How do you know all that?" asks Don Eligio.

"Huh! How do I know! I have just said that she came to our house to discuss the matter with my mother. Before that I said I had known her all her life. Then, now, I could see her with my own eyes crying her heart out, all on account of that disgusting old thief! Finally. . . . Shall I say it right out, Don Eligio!"

"Say it just as it was!"

"Well, she said no! That's putting it just as it was!"

Oh, I didn't mind being turned down so sharply. In those days I had, or thought I had—which amounts to the same thing—a great deal to occupy my mind and afford distractions. Money, in the first place; and money gives you, along with all the rest, certain ideas you would never have in the world except for money. The problem of spending I partly solved with the help of Gerolamo Pomino Second, who was a genius in that line and whom wise paternal restrictions always kept with pockets insufficiently lined.

"Mino" stuck to Berto and me like our shadows—now my shadow and now Berto's, that is. It was wonderful how Mino could change makeup according as it were I or Berto. When he hobnobbed with my brother, he became a regular dandy, and his father would loosen

up a little on the purse-strings (for Gerolamo the elder had a weakness for "gentlemen"). But Berto did not find Mino so very congenial on the whole. As soon as he began to notice that Mino, his young worshipper, was imitating not only his clothes and his neckties but even the gait with which he walked, he would lose patience and finally say something that would drive the fellow away. Mino then would take up with me (and his father would duly draw the purse-strings tight again).

I was more tractable with people than brother Berto. I could swallow Mino's adulation for the fun I got out of him. Then, after a time, I would be sorry; for, in my eagerness to a show off in front of him, I would almost always go a bit too far in getting Mino into scrapes of which I would be bound to share the consequences.

Well, one day, while Mino and I were out hunting, I began to gossip about how Malagna was carrying on with his wife. In the course of our conversation it developed that Mino had long had his eye on a girl, who happened to be the daughter of one of Malagna's cousins! The miss herself seemed not to be disinclined toward him; but for all of that he had never yet been able to exchange two words with her.

"I bet you never had the pluck to try," I offered jestingly. Mino averred he had; but I thought he blushed too much in saying so. "I did have a talk with their maid," he added. "And what I learned from her would make you laugh! Why, according to the maid, old Malagna is down there all the time, these days, and he seems to be trying to cook up something, with the connivance of the mother. She is an own cousin of his, and a pretty poor sort, I take it. . . ."

"What is he trying to pull off?"

"Why, it seems that when Malagna's first wife died, this old witch—she's a widow named Pescatore!—got the idea of saddling her daughter off on him. Batty married Oliva of course. Well, the Pescatore woman called him everything she could put her tongue to—fool, thief, traitor to his own blood, and so on; and she even gave her daughter a thrashing because the girl had not exerted herself enough to catch the old fool's eye. Now recently Batty has been going down there crying calamity because he has had no son to leave his money to. 'Serves you right!' says the old lady—for not having taken her daughter of course. Who knows what scheme she may now be working up?"

To tell the truth, I was sincere in the horror with which I put my hands to my ears and bade Mino say no more. In those days I liked to pose as a rounder of experience: but at bottom I was as innocent as a child. Nevertheless, from my knowledge of the quarrels that had raged and were still raging between the Malagnas, man and wife, I thought there might be some fire behind the smoke that maid was raising. I made up my mind to try and discover the exact truth—to help Oliva out a little, if for nothing else. I asked Mino for the address of this cousin of Malagna. He gave it to me willingly, begging me, besides, to put in a good word for him if I ever met the girl. He also asked me to remember that she was his.

"Don't worry!" I replied to this latter caution. "I won't cut you out!"

It so happened that the very next morning, as mother told me, a note we had given was falling due, and I used that occasion for rooting Malagna out in the Pescatore

cottage. With a purpose in view, I covered the whole distance on the run, and broke, panting and perspiring, into the house:

"Malagna, the note . . . the note . . . !"

If I had not known already that this rascal's conscience was not so very clean I would have suspected as much that day from the utter consternation in which he rose, pale, stammering, aghast, to his feet:

"Wh-wh-what n-note!"

"Why, the money we owe to So-and-So. . . . Mother is worried to death! . . ."

Batty Malagna sank into his chair again with an "ah" of relief that gave the measure of the terror that had seized on him:

"All arranged! All arranged! My, how you scared me! . . . I renewed it, of course . . . for three months . . . paying the interest—a lot of money. . . . You mean to say you ran all the way down here just for that? . . ."

He was good-humored now, and he laughed and laughed, his great belly shaking up and down. He offered me a chair and introduced me to the ladies:

"Mattia Pascal. My cousin, Marianna Dondi-Pescatore. Romilda, her daughter,—I call her my 'niece.'"

Then he insisted that I take a drink of something to cool off after my long and ridiculous run. . . .

"Romilda, would you mind . . . just a little something?"

"Evidently feels himself at home!" I commented to myself.

Romilda rose, looked with a quick glance of inquiry at her mother, left the room, and presently returned

with a glass and a bottle of vermouth on a tray. Whereupon the widow snapped impatiently:

"No, no! Not that! Here, I'd better do it myself!"

She took the tray away from Romilda and hurried into the pantry. When she came back, it was a different tray, a brand new red enameled one, with a magnificent cordial set—a silver-plated elephant, with a bottle of *rosolio* on the crupper, and a dozen little glasses hanging loosely in a rack and tinkling as she walked.

I should have preferred the vermouth; but I accepted the *rosolio.* Malagna and the widow took some too. Romilda declined.

I did not stay long, that first time, in order to have a pretext for coming back again. I excused myself by saying that mother would be uneasy about the note; so I had better return another day to enjoy a longer chat with the two ladies.

From her manner of offering me her cold, bony, withered hand, I judged that Signora Marianna Dondi-Pescatore was not particular about having me call again. She bowed very stiffly and said nothing. But I was more than repaid by the smile of cordial interest Romilda gave me, with a glance, soft and at the same time sorrowful, which drew my attention to her eyes again. I had noticed them when I first came in: quite unusual eyes, a strange dark green shaded by wonderfully long lashes—eyes of night, set like jewels between two waves of ebony black hair that made their way down over her temples and forehead as though to set off the luminous whiteness of her skin.

The house was quite plainly furnished; but already among the original pieces a few new-comers were conspicuous from their pretentious and over-ornamented

elegance. Two large lamps of expensive earthenware—still unused apparently—with globes of ground glass in fantastic design, sat on a very ramshackle dresser which had a discolored marble top and a round mirror rising from the back. In front of a sofa that had seen better days long since was a tea table, with gilded legs and a top painted in lurid colors. A cabinet against the wall was a valuable antique in Japanese lacquer. I noticed a glitter of satisfaction in Malagna's eyes as they rested on these gaudy objects, a look I had observed also when the cordial set came into the room.

On the walls was a profusion of old and not intolerable prints, some of which Malagna insisted that I admire. They were the work, he said, of Francesco Antonio Pescatore, his cousin, an engraver of great talent who died (as he added, in a whisper) in a lunatic asylum at Turin.

"Here is a picture of him," Batty continued. "He drew it himself in front of a mirror!"

I had been studying Romilda all the while, and on comparing her with her mother, I had concluded: "No, she must take after her father instead." With the picture of the man before me now, I did not know what to say. It is not fair, I suppose, to venture libelous guesses as to the integrity of Marianna Dondi; though I know she was a woman capable of anything. But that picture showed her husband as a very handsome man. How could he ever have fallen in love with such an ugly harpy as she was? To do a thing like that he must have been a very loony lunatic indeed!

My impressions of that first visit I faithfully reported to Mino, speaking of Romilda with such warmth of admiration that his distant interest in the girl flared up

at once into a passion. He was delighted that I had found her so charming and that his choice had my wholehearted approbation.

"So what are your intentions?" I asked. The widow, I agreed with him, was not a person to inspire confidence; but I was ready to stake my oath on the virtue of the daughter. There could be no doubt, either, as to the miserable designs of Malagna. The girl should be rescued therefore at any cost and without loss of time.

"But how?" asked Gerolamino, hanging breathless upon my every word.

"That's the question!" said I. "First of all we must be sure about a number of things, keep our eyes open, study the terrain. I can't say how right off, in so many words, but we'll see. Give me a free hand, meantime; and I'll pull you through. I'm getting interested in this affair! It's exciting!"

Pomino noticed a certain undertone in my voice that worried him.

"Well, but . . . why . . . you say I ought to marry her?"

"I'm not saying anything, just yet. But would you be afraid to?"

"No, I'm not afraid . . . why do you ask?"

"Why, you seem to be going a bit too fast. Slow up a little now, and use your head. Supposing we discover beyond reasonable doubt that she is quite all she ought to be—a good girl, virtuous, well-mannered, pure (no need to mention her looks: she's a queen—and you love her, don't you?);—well, supposing also we find that, through the viciousness of her mother and that other scoundrel, she is exposed to a very grave danger —to a vulgar criminal bargain that will leave her dis-

graced forever: would you shrink from facing the situation like a man? Would you refuse to do an act as meritorious as it is holy?"

"No-o-o! No-o!" stammered Pomino. "I wouldn't! But how about father?"

"Think he would object? I doubt it! Why should he? On account of the dowry, perhaps? Surely on no other ground! She's the daughter of an artist, you see, an engraver of great talent, who died in a . . . well, anyhow . . . who died in Turin. But your father is rich, and he has only you to provide for: you will be satisfied, so why should he care? And then besides, in case you can't bring him around by persuasion, there's nothing to be afraid of. . . . You disappear with the girl some day; and everything is arranged! Land's sake, Pomino, you wouldn't let a little thing like a father stop you?"

Pomino laughed; and I proceeded to show him, two times two are four, that he had been born a husband much as some men are born poets. I painted the joys and consolations of married life with a jolly little girl like Romilda—the tenderness and adoration she would have for a brave man like Mino . . . her saviour.

"For the moment," I concluded, "you must find a way to attract her attention, get a word to her somehow, perhaps drop her a line. Imagine the state of mind the poor thing must be in now . . . a fly caught in a spider's web. A letter from you might be the chip that would save her from drowning. My job will be to stand watch. I'll hang around the house and see what I can do. At the first good chance, I'll introduce you. That's good sense, isn't it?"

"Very good!" said Pomino.

Now just why was I so anxious to get Romilda married? There was no reason whatever that I should be. As I said, I always liked to show off before Pomino. Once I started talking, I kept on, all the difficulties vanishing. I was inclined, in general, to do things impulsively and thoughtlessly. Perhaps that was one of the things for which the girls liked me in spite of my cock-eye and my rather ungainly physique. But in this case there was something else besides. My little intrigue gathered zest for me from the prospect of checkmating that ridiculous old satyr in one of his infamous designs —of beating him at his own game and making a fool of him. Finally came a sincere pity for Oliva; and the hope of doing just a little something for that other girl who had really made a deep impression on me.

Now I must appeal to you again. Was it my fault if Pomino proved to be a rabbit when it came to executing schemes of mine that required courage and decision? Was it my fault if Romilda fell in love with me instead of falling in love with him (I always praised him to the very skies!)? Was it my fault, finally, if that devilish widow Pescatore was shrewd enough to make me believe that I had skillfully exorcized the diffidence in her, and even, by my jokes, performed the miracle of bringing a laugh to hard thin lips which had never before been known to smile? I saw her gradually change toward me. I saw that my visits were at last welcome. I concluded that with a young man frequenting her house, a young man who was rich (I still thought I was rich, you see) and who gave every indication of being in love with her daughter, she had finally abandoned her iniquitous idea—if such an idea had ever

entered her head (I was so far taken in that I actually began to doubt this latter).

Of course, I should have paid more attention to two facts—surprising when you think of them: first, that I never again found Malagna at her house: and second that she would receive me only during the forenoon. But how could I tell at just that time that those particular facts were significant? Natural enough, wasn't it, to ask me to come early in the day (I was always proposing walks in the woods and fields, which are more agreeable when the sun is not too high)? Then again I had fallen in love with Romilda myself—though I was always pleading the cause of Pomino. I loved her with a wild impetuous passion—her dark green eyes under the long lashes, her nose, her lips, her cheeks, her everything—even a mole she had on the back of her neck and an almost invisible scar on one of her hands —hands that I kissed and kissed and kissed with the abandonment of a lost soul—all in the name of Pomino, to be sure.

And yet, probably nothing serious would ever have come of it, had not Romilda, one day (we were picnicing at "The Coops" and her mother was inspecting the old mill-wheel a safe distance away), suddenly lost the laughter with which she greeted my standing jokes about Pomino, burst into tears, and thrown her arms about my neck, begging me in the utmost distress to have pity on her.

"Oh take me away with you somewhere, Mattia," she cried, "take me away . . . away way off where I shall never see mother, or the house, or Malagna, or anybody else again! Take me away, today, this afternoon!"

Take her away? How could I take her away? And why?

It is true that for some days thereafter, still under the spell of her mad abandonment, I was thinking, with my usual determination also, of doing the right thing by her. I began preparing mother gradually for the news of my approaching marriage—a marriage I could no longer in any decency avoid. When, lo and behold, like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, I get a short and polite note from Romilda, requesting me to cease my attentions to her, to refrain from any further visits at her house, and to regard our friendship as ended for good and all.

"So that's that! What can have happened, I wonder?"

When, lo and behold again, who should come running over to our house but Oliva, sobbing and taking on, as though the world were coming to an end. The most unhappy woman the Lord ever made! House and home destroyed beyond repair! Nothing more for her to live for. . . . Her "man" had secured the proof at last—proof that it was not his fault but hers! He had just come in and made the announcement triumphantly!

I was present while Oliva told her story. How I held my tongue I do not know—regard for mother's feelings, more than anything else, perhaps. But I do know that I left the room with my hands to my head, shut myself up in my study, and, sick at heart, began to ask myself how Romilda, after what had occurred between her and me, could lend herself to such a despicable ruse. A true daughter of her mother, that she was! Look! Not only had they tricked that old idiot Malagna—a trick too mean to play even on a thief; but they had made a fool

of me, of me, of me! And not only the mother! Romilda, too, had used me for her own vile ends . . . to get money from another man who was robbing me! And poor Oliva, meantime . . . publicly disgraced, her happiness and reputation gone forever!

I raged in my room there the greater part of the day; but toward evening I could stand it no longer. I went out and, with Romilda's letter in my pocket, made for Oliva's house.

I found the poor girl packing her things and about to go back to her father's. She had never as yet breathed a word to old Salvoni of all she had had to put up with from Malagna.

"How can I think of living with him any longer," she moaned. "No, it's all over! If only he had taken up with a different girl . . . then perhaps. . . ."

"So you know who it is then?" I interrupted.

In answer she covered her face with her hands and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed:

"What a girl!" she finally exclaimed raising her arms above her head. "What a girl! And her mother! Her own mother! Together, understand?"

"You are not telling me anything I don't know," I now burst out. "Here! Just have a look at this!"

I handed her the letter. Oliva stared at it blankly for a moment; then she took it from me and asked:

"A letter? What about?"

Oliva had never been to school, and she read with difficulty. Her eyes seemed to beg me to spare her the effort of deciphering all those words at that moment of her supreme anguish.

"Read!" I insisted.

She wiped her eyes, unfolded the letter, and spelled

the words out one by one, whispering them to me syllable by syllable. After a line or two, she turned the page and looked at the signature. Then she looked at me, her eyes bulging from their sockets:

"You?" she gasped.

"Here," I answered, "let me read it aloud to you! I'll begin at the beginning."

But she clasped the letter to her breast, to keep it from me:

"No," she screamed, "this is mine, mine! I can use this letter!"

I smiled bitterly:

"How can you use it? You might show it to him? But, my poor girl, there isn't a word in the whole letter that would lead your husband to disbelieve something that he is only too anxious to believe? They've made him swallow it, bait, hook, and line!"

"Ah yes, that's so! That's so!" Oliva groaned. "And do you know what he did? He came and told me never to dare, for the life of me, to breathe one word against the good name of that niece of his!"

"Why, exactly! So you see!" I answered. "You would gain nothing by telling him the truth. That is the very last thing you should try to do. Your game rather is to reassure him, keep him thinking it is as he thinks it is. . . . Don't you agree?"

What in the world could have happened (a month later, more or less) that Malagna should one day give his wife a terrible beating, and then, his mouth still frothing, come storming into our front room demanding that I "make good" for the dishonor I had brought upon an innocent girl—his niece? His niece, if you please, the niece of my father's best friend, and a poor

orphan, a poor orphan with no one to protect her. When he cooled off enough to talk a little more intelligibly he added that, for his part, he would have preferred to keep the matter quiet—he had no children of his own, you see; and he had made up his mind to take the baby, when it came, and bring it up as his own. But now, since the good Lord had been so merciful *as to give him a legitimate child by his own wife,* he couldn't—he really couldn't in justice to his future heir—adopt another's offspring to take the rightful place of his first-born.

"It's Mattia's work!" he began storming again, "Mattia must provide! And he must see to it at once—at once, do you hear! I am not going to waste any words. I'm going to be obeyed, or something will happen here that this town won't forget in a hurry!"

Now supposing we stop to consider a moment, at this point in my story. I've been through a good deal in the course of my checkered career. To have my reader think me a fool, or even worse than that, would not hurt my feelings so very much. As I said, I am a person quite beyond this life, and nothing matters to me now. I suggest that we stop and think a moment, not out of vanity, therefore, but just to keep things straight.

It must be fairly evident that Romilda could have done nothing really wrong so far as tricking her "uncle" is concerned. Otherwise, why should Malagna have beaten his wife for her infidelity, and denounced me to my mother for ruining his niece? Romilda claims, in fact, that shortly after our visit to "The Coops," she made known to her mother the situation that bound her to me inseparably. But the old lady flew into a passion and averred that, under no conditions whatsoever, would

she allow her daughter, Romilda, to marry a good-for-nothing who would soon be losing the last cent to his name and be a beggar sleeping in the gutter. Now, since Romilda, quite of her own accord, had brought upon herself the greatest misfortune that can happen to a girl, there was nothing left for Signora Pescatore —as a prudent mother—to do, except to find the best possible solution to such a difficulty. What this solution was I need not say. When Malagna came at his usual hour, the mother found an excuse to withdraw, leaving Romilda alone with her uncle. Then Romilda, weeping "hot tears" as she says, threw herself at his feet, told him the plight she was in and hinted at what her mother was asking her to do. She begged him to use his influence to bring her mother to a more reasonable and honorable frame of mind; since she belonged already to another man to whom she was determined to remain faithful.

Malagna was touched by her story—touched the way a man like him could be touched. He reminded her that she was not yet of age and accordingly was still under her mother's control—the mother having the power to take legal action against me if she felt so inclined. He, for his part, so he said, could not, in all conscience recommend a man like me to any girl for a husband—libertine, waster, loafer that I was. She, Romilda, therefore should hold herself ready to make some sacrifice of her emotions to her mother's very just displeasure; and such conduct might in the end be to her very great advantage. He, for instance, might find a way—well yes—if everything were kept absolutely quiet—to provide for the child that was to come, become its father—exactly, yes, its father—since he had no chil-

dren of his own—and for years and years he had so longed to have an heir! . . .

Tell me now in all seriousness: could anybody be more square, more honest, more upright than that? Here's the point: all he had stolen from the real father (from me, that is) he would pass back by settling it on the future child. Was he to blame if I, ungrateful scamp, thereafter went and broke the eggs in his other basket? One, all right! But two? No sir! Two was too much!

Too much, I suppose, because, as Malagna probably figured it out, my brother Roberto had contracted a very advantageous marriage, and there was no need to bother about the money that had been stolen from him. . . .

So you see: having once fallen into the hands of these square, upright, and honest people, I was responsible for all the wrong that had been done. What more natural, therefore, than that I should take the consequences?

At first I stood my ground, refusing angrily. But my mother already could foresee the ruin that was shortly to overtake us. She saw in my marriage to Romilda—a relative of the man who had our money—a possible avenue of escape for me. So I gave in. The wedding took place.

But over my future with my young—and beautiful—wife, lowered the menacing, wrathful, vindictive shadow of Signora Marianna Dondi-Pescatore, unwillingly the mother-in-law of a beggar like me!

V

How I Was Ripened

THE old witch simply could not swallow it.

"What have you gained, what have you gained?" she would ask. "You weren't satisfied to sneak into my house like a thief, seduce my daughter, and cover her with shame? That wasn't enough for you, was it!"

"No, mother dear," I would answer, "for if I had stopped there, I would have been guilty of doing something likely to please you!"

"Do you hear?" she would then shout at her daughter. "Do you hear? He is proud of it, actually proud of it! He dares to brag about what he went and did with that . . ."—and at this point a torrent of abuse upon Oliva. Then with the backs of her hands clamped upon her hips and her elbows thrown far forward, she would end: "But, I say, what have you gained by it? You've ruined your own son, that's what you've gained. . . . He won't get a cent of the money. . . . Oh yes . . . of course . . ." (turning to Romilda again) "of course . . . what does he care? . . . That other one is his too. . . ."

She never failed to use this final thrust in any of her attacks upon me, knowing well the effect it had upon my wife. Romilda surely had a reason to be jealous of the child who would be born to Oliva—in ease, and luxury,

a silver spoon in its mouth; while hers would come into the world in poverty, its future ill-secured, the passions of domestic hatred seething around it. And this bleeding soreness in her heart was not relieved by the talk that well-intentioned gossips brought her of how happy "Aunt Malagna" was at the blessing the Lord had finally bestowed upon her. . . . Yes, Oliva was getting to be as pretty as a picture . . . fresh, rosy, blossoming, never so well, never so prosperous. . . . Whereas Romilda . . . well, there she was, huddled on a miserable sofa, pale, wasted, underfed, without one bright prospect to comfort her, without a single cheerful thought, without the energy to speak or the strength to open her eyes. . . .

This too my fault? So it seemed!—She could no longer bear the sight of me nor the sound of my voice. And it was worse still when, to save from foreclosure the last piece of rented property we owned—"The Coops" and the old mill—we had to sell the Pascal mansion itself. That obliged my mother to come and live with us.

Letting our house go, for that matter, did not help at all. The approaching birth of an heir put Malagna in a position to break every leash of scruple that had hitherto restrained him. He came to an understanding with our creditors and, through a dummy purchaser, bought in our property for a song. What the auction realized in cash was not enough to cover the mortgage on "The Coops" alone. Our creditors brought insolvency upon us and the court appointed a receiver to manage our affairs.

What was I now to do? Hopelessly I began looking around for work, any sort of work that would provide

for the most elementary needs of my family. Untrained, uneducated, with the reputation my recent escapades and my longstanding shiftlessness had fastened upon me, I found it difficult to interest anyone in giving me a job. Then the scenes I was compelled to endure at home deprived me of a peace of mind essential for calm consideration of the possible chances that lay open to me.

Words cannot describe my feelings at seeing my own mother there in forced contact with the Pescatore woman. The dear old lady, too good for this world, aware at last—too crushingly aware—of the mistakes she had been making through her unwillingness to believe in the evil men can do (for these mistakes I never held her to account in my own heart), kept quite to herself, sitting day in day out in a corner of our living room, her hands in her lap, her head lowered, as though she were never sure she had a right to be there, as though, at almost any moment, she might be called upon to leave (and, for that matter, would be glad to leave). How could her presence have been a nuisance to anyone? Every now and then she would look up at Romilda and smile pitifully: but she dared make no advances beyond that. Once during her first days with us she had run to do some little thing for the poor girl; but my mother-in-law had shoved her rudely aside:

"Don't you bother! This child is mine! I know what she wants!"

Romilda was very ill at the moment; and, in view of that, I said nothing. But thereafter I was on the watch to see that no disrespect was offered my wretched mamma. Soon I observed that this surveillance was a source of galling irritation to the widow and even to Romilda; and I was alarmed lest my absence from the

house at any time furnish occasion for them to vent their spite upon her. In such a case, I knew my mother would never say a word to me. Imagine my uneasiness, then, whenever I was away! And on returning I could never refrain from studying her face to see if she had wept. She would answer my gaze with a tender smile:

"Why do you look at me like that, Mattia?"

"Are you all right, mamma?"

She would lift a hand slightly:

"Don't you see I am all right? Go to Romilda now! The poor thing is lonely and in pain!"

I decided finally to write to brother Berto, who was living at Oneglia. In asking him to take mamma to live with him, I made him understand that it was not to ease myself of a burden I was only too glad to carry even in the squalor in which I was then living, but just to make life bearable for her. Berto answered that he could not possibly. Our financial disaster had left him in a very painful position toward his wife's family and toward that lady herself. He was living on her dowry now, and could not think of asking her to assume the support of another person. But that was not the only difficulty. Mother would be in the same fix with him as she was with me; for he too was staying with his mother-in-law—good enough woman, to be sure; but there would soon be trouble if our mother came. Who ever heard of two mothers-in-law getting along together in the same house? There were positive advantages also in keeping mamma with me. She would thus be spending her last years in the town where she had always lived; and not be called upon to adapt herself to new people and new ways. What pained him most was his

inability to send me even a little money—since every penny he spent he had to beg from his wife.

I was careful not to show this letter to my mother; though I dare say that had my desperate circumstances at the moment not blinded my calmer judgment, I should not have found it so utterly despicable as it seemed to me then. I have always had the happy—or unhappy—faculty of seeing both sides of every question. I would normally have reasoned that if, let us say, you steal the tail-feathers of a nightingale, the poor bird can still sing; but strip them from a peacock, and what can the peacock do? Roberto had, with careful thought I do not doubt, worked out a balanced scheme of life whereby he could live comfortably and even with a certain dignity on his wife's income. To disturb that balance would have meant for him an untold, an irreparable, sacrifice. An agreeable address, good manners, a not inelegant pose as a gentleman of breeding—all these Roberto had—they were all he had—to give his wife. To be able conscientiously to lay the burden of our mother upon her, he would have had to offer just a bit of real affection, too. In making brother Berto, God had endowed him with many things; but heart was not one of them. With this important member lacking, poor Berto was a hopeless case!

So things went from bad to worse with us; and I could find no help for it. A few odds and ends, among our personal belongings, had survived the wreck of our fortune; and these kept us going for a time. But when my mother sold the last trinkets my father had given her (sacred memories they bore!), the Pescatore woman saw the time approaching when we would fall back upon the miserable income of forty lire a month that

belonged to her. She became more hateful and ferocious from day to day. I could see that the storm I had forestalled so long was now about to break—and all the more violently from its long repression, as well as from the very humility with which mamma was accepting it all. I would pace nervously up and down the room, with the widow's flaming eyes upon me. When I felt the atmosphere growing too tense, I would go out of doors, to avoid all pretext for an outburst. Then I would begin to fear for mamma, and hurry back again.

One day I stayed away a second too long. The cyclone came at last, and on the most trivial of provocations—a visit from the two old servants who had worked for years in our former home. One of them had put nothing aside in her long service with us, so she had accepted work with another family. But our old Margherita, alone in the world, and of a saving disposition, had stored away a quite respectable sum against her declining days. It seems that mamma ventured to express some of her real feelings to these two companions of her whole married life; but, quite apart from that, Margherita had perceived at a glance the strained situation in our new home.

"Oh do come and live with me!" she had proffered in the goodness of her heart. "I have two nice bright rooms, with a porch looking toward the water. . . . And you ought to see the flowers in my window box!"

Yes, there the two of them could finish their days together in the affection and devotion that had united them for years!

Mother, of course—what else could she say?—declined; and this refusal was enough to throw the widow

Pescatore into spasms. When I walked into the house I found her shaking her fists in Margherita's face, while our old servant was standing her ground and holding her assailant off as best she could. Mamma, weeping, moaning, trembling like a leaf, was clinging to the other maid as though begging for protection. I lost control of myself completely. Dashing upon my mother-in-law, I seized her by her two wrists and threw her back with all my might. She slipped on the floor and fell. Up again in a flash, she came back at me like a tigress; stopping, however, before her fangs quite reached my face.

"Out of my house!" she shouted, gasping for breath in her rage. "You—and that mother of yours! Out of my house with you! Out of my house!"

"Listen!" I said, calmly, though my voice may have trembled from the effort I was making to restrain myself; "Listen! Mamma and I are not going to stir! You are the one who had better be going. In fact, I should go right now if I were you. Don't you dare get me any madder than I am! There's the door! And you know the road!"

Romilda meantime had been lying on the sofa, too ill to sit up. But now, screaming and weeping hysterically, she leapt to her feet and threw herself into her mother's arms.

"Oh no, mamma! Don't leave me here! Don't leave me here all alone with these people!"

"You wanted him! You wanted him! And now you've got him, the worthless beggar! I shall not stay under the same roof with him another second!"

She did not go, of course. But two days later another hurricane blew into the house. My Aunt Scolastica,

having heard the story from Margherita, I suppose, swept in upon us in her usual breezy style. The scene that followed would be a success on any stage.

That morning, my wife's mother was making bread in our kitchen-living room, her sleeves rolled up to her elbows and her skirt caught up around her waist to keep it clean. Barely turning her head as Aunt Scolastica came in, she went on sifting her flour and kneading her dough as coolly as could be. Auntie did not notice the slight. She had opened the door without a knock or a good-day and gone straight to mamma, as though my mother were the only person present in the room.

"Here," she began, "get into your things. I'm going to take you home with me. You could hear the noise ten miles away! So here I am. Come, step lively! Wrap up your duds, and we're off!"

These phrases came out in short sharp explosions. The end of her long nose, hooked like a beak to her dark bilious face, kept going up and down from the excitement suppressed within her. There was a wicked glare in her beady ferret-like eyes.

Not a word meantime from the bread-board! The widow Pescatore had wet her dough and moulded it into a heavy round mass which she kept picking up and thumping down on the board, each thump giving an answer to an ejaculation from my aunt. Scolastica noticed the rhythm, and said a few more things. Thump: "Yes, indeed!" Thump: "I should say so!" Thump: "Oh really!" Thump: "You don't say!" Finally my mother-in-law reached for the rolling-pin and laid it down on the edge of the board, with a thump that meant: "And I've got this too, you see!"

This was the spark that touched off the magazine.

Aunt Scolastica jumped to her feet, tore a shawl from her shoulders, and tossed it spitefully at my mother:

"Put that on—never mind your other rags—and start yourself out of here!"

Then she marched over to the bread-board and confronted the widow Pescatore. The latter drew back a step, picking up the rolling-pin. Scolastica turned to the bread-board, gathered up the heavy, sticky mess of dough in her two hands and brought it down upon the woman's head. My mother-in-law was no match for this super-harpy. Pushing her into a corner, Aunt Scolastica plastered the dough down over the poor woman's face, working it into her eyes, her nose, her mouth, her hair—and wherever the paste touched, it caught for good. Then she seized mamma by the arm and dragged her out through the door.

What followed was for my exclusive benefit. Handful by handful the Pescatore woman loosened the dough from her face and threw it at me as I sat there doubled up with laughter in a corner. Then she rushed upon me, pulled my beard, scratched my face, kicked my shins, and finally, in a paroxysm of rage, threw herself to the floor, where she lay rolling round and round kicking in all directions. Poor Romilda, in the next room was—*sit venia verbo*—vomiting with loud gags of pain.

"Why mother, shame on you!" I called to the heap of humanity squirming on the floor. "You are showing your legs! You are showing your legs! For shame!"

* * * * *

I have been able since that morning to laugh at every

misfortune, big or little, that has ever overtaken me. At that moment I saw myself a villain in the most comic tragedy ever enacted on this earth: my mother in flight with that crazy aunt of mine; my wife in the next room in the condition I described; Marianna Pescatore there on the floor gesturing with her legs . . . while I, I sat there doubled up in my corner, I, a down-and-out, a man with no visible resources for his next day of life, with my beard and clothing sticky with dough, my face scratched, bruised, and dripping I could not say whether with blood, or with tears from too much laughing.

To decide this latter point I went over to the mirror. It was tears! But I had been well clawed up too. And my eye, my famous crooked eye! That unruly member was more than ever bent on looking where it chose. "Good for you!" I apostrophized; "you at least are without a boss!" I reached for my hat and ran out of the house, determined not to set foot in it again till I had found the means for supporting, in a poor way at least, my wife, myself, and my future child.

The spiteful contempt I now felt for myself over my reckless squandering of so many years made me understand that my present plight would bring me ridicule rather than pity from any one I might appeal to. Certainly I deserved every bit of my misfortune. Only one person in the world had any reason to feel the slightest sympathy for me—the man who had pillaged my inheritance. But how eager Batty Malagna would be to rush to my assistance after what had taken place between him and me!

No! Succor came, when it came, from a quarter where I should never have dreamed of looking for it.

I wandered aimlessly about town all that day; and

it was getting dark when by the merest chance I came upon Gerolamo Pomino, Second. Mino saw me first; and, with the idea of avoiding me, turned about and hurried off in the other direction.

"Pomino," I called after him. "Pomino!"

"What do you want?" he said, turning sullenly in his tracks. He did not raise his eyes, as I came up to him.

"Why, Pomino, old man," I said, slapping him on the back and laughing in real amusement at his long face; "You aren't angry at me—honestly?"

Oh the ingratitude of men! Pomino was angry at me, in fact very angry at me—for double-crossing him, as he claimed, in the matter of the girl. And I could not at once convince him that if there had been any treason, I was the one who had most right to complain; that he ought, in fact, to lie down on the ground right there and kiss my boots in thankfulness.

I was still bubbling with the bitter over-exhilarated gaiety which had come upon me at the sight of my face in the mirror:

"See these scratches?" I said to him at a certain point. "I got them from her?"

"From Ro . . . from your wife, I mean?"

"Well—from her mother, at least!" And I told him why and how. He smiled but without much fervor. I suppose he was saying to himself that the widow Pescatore would not have treated him that way—he was not in quite my fix, financially; besides his general disposition was much better than mine. I was almost tempted to ask him why, if he felt so strongly about the whole affair, he had not married Romilda in the first place as I had encouraged him to do, running away with the

girl before I had been so unlucky as to fall in love with her myself. In the end all that had happened had happened because he was such an absurd ninny in a case where courage and decision were absolute essentials. However, I did not press that point. Instead I asked him simply:

"What are you doing to amuse yourself, these days?"

"Nothing!" he sighed dejectedly. "I'm bored to death! Nobody around to have any fun with!"

There was such a peevish dejection in the tone with which he pronounced these words, that I suddenly divined what was really the matter with him. To be sure Mino had been more or less worked up over Romilda; but it had not been that so much as the loss of his companionship with Berto and me. Berto had moved away; and Romilda had spoiled everything in my direction. With these two props of his existence gone, what was left for poor Pomino?

"No one to have any fun with? Why don't you get married, man? That's exciting enough! Look at me!"

Tragi-comically, he shook his head, closed his eyes, and raised his right hand for an oath:

"Never! Never! Never!"

"You're a wise man, Pomino! Stick to that, and you'll come out all right! . . . Meantime, you're looking for company, and I am at your service—for an all-night spree, if you say so!"

I told him of the resolution I had made on leaving my house, coming eventually to the desperate situation in which I found myself as regards money.

"My dear old fellow . . ." said Pomino, offering me all he had.

But I refused. It was not that kind of help I needed.

A few lire more or less, and the next day I would be as badly off as ever. No, what I wanted was a position, and a permanent one, if possible.

"Wait a moment," exclaimed Pomino, his face brightening with an inspiration. "I have it! . . . You know about my father, don't you? He's working with this Administration. . . ."

"I had not heard about that; but I can well imagine him in a good place!"

"He is. They've made him District Inspector of Education."

"That, to tell the truth, does surprise me!"

"Well, I remember that last night at dinner. . . . Say, you know an old fellow by the name of Romitelli?"

"No!"

"Nonsense, of course you do! That old codger down at the Boccamazza Library! Deaf, and almost blind, to begin with. But now he's broken down completely and they've retired him on a pension. My old man says the place is a wreck, and that unless something is done about it pretty soon, the books will all be ruined. Why isn't that just the thing for you?"

"I? A librarian?" I exclaimed. "But that takes a man of education. . . ."

"And why not you?" Pomino answered. "You know as much as Romitelli ever did!"

That was a sound argument in truth. Mino suggested that it might be better to approach his father through Aunt Scolastica, "who had always been on the right side of his old man."

I spent the night with Mino and the next morning I hurried to Aunt Scolastica's. That relentless grena-

dier, true to form as usual, refused to see me; but I talked the matter over with mamma at length.

Four days later, I became Custodian of the Boccamazza Foundation under the Department of Education. My salary would be sixty lire a month. Sixty lire a month! I would be richer than the widow Pescatore! What a triumph!

I almost enjoyed my new place during the first few months—largely on account of Romitelli, whom I could never bring to understand that he had been pensioned by the Town and therefore was under no obligation to continue "working" at the Library. Every morning, at nine o'clock sharp, neither one minute earlier nor one minute later, I would see him coming in on his four legs. (So I called them—for the two canes he carried, one in each hand, were much more useful than the two rickety stilts with which old age had left him.) Once through the door, he would extract from the pocket of his overcoat a huge old-fashioned watch in a brass case, which he would hang, with its yard or more of chain, on a nail in the wall. Then he would take his seat in the "office," put the two canes between his legs, produce from his inside pocket a skull-cap, a snuff-box, and a red and black checkered handkerchief, take a pinch of snuff, blow his nose, and finally, with these preliminaries laboriously, punctually and scrupulously completed, open a drawer in his desk and get out an old volume belonging to the library: "An Historical Dictionary of Musicians, Artists and Connoisseurs, living and dead," published at Venice in 1758.

"Signor Romitelli!" I would call, watching him go through his methodical routine in perfect self-possession,

apparently not in the least aware of my humble presence. "Signor Romitelli!"

But the old man was stone deaf. He would not have heard a cannon had it gone off under his nose. At last I would go up and shake him by the arm. He would turn around and squint at me, his whole face cooperating in the effort necessary for focussing his eyes; next he would show his yellow teeth in something intended for a smile; then he would slowly lower his head over the ancient volume—one would have thought for a nap to last the rest of the day. But no! On the contrary! He would bring his one serviceable eye to the fraction of an inch from the page and begin pronouncing aloud in a shrill cracked voice: "Birnbaum . . . Johann Birnbaum . . . Johann Abram Birnbaum printed . . . printed at Leipzic in 1738 . . . at Leipzic in 1738 . . . a pamphlet in octavo . . . in octavo . . . on a passage of the Musical . . . Musical Critic. . . . Mitzler reprinted this . . . Mitzler . . . in the first volume of his Musical Library . . . in 1739 . . . 1739."

Why was he always repeating such phrases and dates sometimes three or four times? Perhaps to remember them better? And why aloud, if he could not hear a sound? I would stand there and look at him in amazement. That poor old man was about ready for the grave (he died, in fact, four months after my own appointment)! What could he possibly care about a pamphlet that Johann Abram Birnbaum, or any one else, published at Leipzic in 1738? And he had to dig the information out with such a horribly painful effort! Lots of good it would do him in the next world! But I imagine it was a matter of principle with him. Libraries were made to read in. Since not a soul ever

entered this one, he must have thought the task devolved on him. He happened on that book as he might have on any other!

On the big table in the "reading-room"—the nave of the old deconsecrated church—not less than an inch of dust had gathered with the years; and one day, to make up for the thanklessness of my village toward a public benefactor, I used the tip of my finger to trace the following inscription in big letters: "To Monsignor Boccamazza, philanthropist, in token of perennial gratitude, this tablet was dedicated by his fellow-citizens."

From time to time two or three books would come tumbling down from one of the higher shelves, followed by a rat as big as a goodsized kitten. On the first such occurrence, I uttered a cry of triumph. Those falling books were to me what Newton's falling apple was to him: "Eureka!" I cried. "Here is something to do at last! I will catch rats and mice, while Romitelli reads about Birnbaum!"

Little as I had learned about my profession as archivist, I knew instinctively what to do in those circumstances. On official paper I drew up a very elaborate memorial to His Excellency, Gerolamo Pomino, Chevalier of the Crown, District Inspector of Education, respectfully petitioning that the Boccamazza Library in the Church of Santa Maria Liberale be provided at the earliest convenience of the Department with at least two (2) cats, the maintenance whereof would result in no addition to the Budget, since the said animals would be abundantly supplied with food from the proceeds of their hunting in said Library. I further respectfully petitioned that the Foundation be authorized to purchase one extra-large trap, with the bait appertaining

thereto (I regarded the word 'cheese' as far too common to submit to the scrutiny of a newly appointed Inspector of Education).

Gerolamo Pomino, Senior, sent me two tiny kittens which had barely been weaned, and were in deadly fear of rats quite as big as they were. To escape starvation they went after the cheese in the trap; and every morning I would find them shut up in the wire cage, lean, scraggly, sorrowful, and too depressed even to mew. I at once addressed a complaint to my superior, and this time I was allowed two honest full-grown cats which set about their business without needing encouragement. The trap, too, no longer stuffed with kittens every night, began to work satisfactorily; and the rats I caught here came into my hands alive. One evening I was a bit put out because Romitelli seemed to pay no attention to all my victories in this field (as though it were his duty to read the books in the Library while that of the rats was to eat their bindings off); so I decided to take two of my recent captures and put them into the drawer where Romitelli kept the "Historical Dictionary of Dead and Living Painters." "That will get you!" I said to myself.

But I was wrong. When Romitelli opened the drawer and the two rats whizzed past his elbow on their way to freedom, he turned to me and asked:

"What was that?"

"Two rats, Signor Romitelli, two!"

"Ah, rats!" said he quietly. They were as much a part of the Library as he was himself. He opened his book as though nothing at all had happened and began, as usual, to read aloud.

* * * * *

In a "Treatise on Trees" by Giovan Vittorio Soderini there is a passage which says that "fruit ripeneth in part from heat and in part from cold, forasmuch as heat manifestly containeth the principle of warming, the which is the efficient cause of maturation." I take it that this venerable pomologist could not have been acquainted with another efficient cause of maturation which is, nevertheless, familiar to fruit-vendors the world over. They take green apples, green pears, green peaches, and the like, and by pinching and otherwise maltreating them reduce them to a soft pulp that has the feel of ripeness.

Thus was my own green soul ripened by the knocks of the world.

In a short time I became a person wholly different from what I had been before. When Romitelli died I was left here in this church where I now am writing, bored to distraction, absolutely, tremendously alone, and yet without a yearning for company.

Regulations required only a few hours of attendance at the Library. But I shrank from my home as from a torture chamber; and from the village streets in shame for my changed estate. No, far better this deserted, this repudiated church with its books, its rats, and its dusty solitude! Thus I kept arguing to myself. But what could I do to pass the time? I could hunt rats! But would that amusement last?

The first time I found myself with a book in my hands (I had taken it up quite casually from one of the shelves), I experienced a chill of horror. Would I, like Romitelli, finally come to feel it my duty to read for all those other readers who never came? I hurled the book angrily across the room. But then I walked over

and picked it up again; I too began to read, and with one eye, also; for my unruly one would have nothing to do with this.

So I read and read, a little of everything, haphazard, but books of philosophy especially. Heavy stuff, I grant you; but when you get a little of it inside you, you grow light as a feather and begin to touch the clouds. I believe I was always a bit queer in my head. But these readings quite finished me. When I no longer knew what I was about, I would shut up the Library, and go off along a little path that led down a steep incline to a solitary strip of seashore. The sight of that monotonous expanse of water filled me with a strange awe that changed little by little into unbearable oppression. As I sat there slowly straining the fine dry sand through my fingers I would lower my head so as not to see; but I could hear, all along the beach, the measured rhythmic wash of the surf.

"So I shall be for always," I would murmur: "unchanging, till the day of my death."

Sudden impulses, strange thoughts that were more like flashes of madness, would arise in me from the mortal fixity of my existence; and I would spring to my feet as though to shake myself free from the stagnation that had gripped me. But there the same sea would come rippling in, splashing its sleepy waves unendingly on the same somnolent shore. Clenching my hands in angry desperation I would cry:

"Why should it be so? Why? Why?"

The tide would come in and a higher wave than usual would wet my feet:

"So you see what you get," it would seem to say "for asking the reasons for certain things! Wet feet!

No, back to your Library, dear boy! Salt water is not good for shoes, and you have no money left to throw away. Back to your Library, and give up philosophy, for a change. You too had better read that Johann Abram Birnbaum published a pamphlet in octavo at Leipzic in 1738. That information will do you no great harm, at the very worst."

And so it went; until one day they came to tell me that my wife was very ill, and that I was needed at home immediately. I remember that I ran all the way as fast as my legs could carry me; but rather to escape from my own feelings at the moment, to avoid at all hazards any realization of the fact that a man in my condition was about to have a son.

When I reached the door of the house, my mother-in-law stopped me, seized me by the shoulders and turned me around in my tracks:

"A doctor, quick! Romilda is dying! Hurry!"

You would feel like sitting down, would you not, on getting a piece of news like that, full in the face and without warning? But no: "Quick! Hurry! Hurry!"

At any rate I started running back again, not knowing exactly where I was headed this time. Every so often I would shout: "A doctor!" "A doctor!" Various people tried to stop me to ask what I wanted a doctor for. Others plucked at my sleeve as I ran by. Some of them looked at me with their faces pale with fright. But I dodged them all and went on running: "A doctor!" "A doctor!"

And the doctor, all this time, was there at my house! When I reached home again, after a mad and fruitless round of all the places where a doctor might be found, the first baby had been born; and it was a girl. The

second, also a girl, was not so anxious to make its entrance into this world.

So it was twins.

This was all long ago! But I can still see them lying there side by side in their cradle, scratching at each other with those little hands that seemed so beautiful but which were animated nevertheless by some savage instinct that it made one shudder to look upon. The poor miserable things, worse off in life than the kittens I found every morning in my trap! Nor did these babies either have the strength to cry: they could scratch—that's all!

I moved them apart; and at the first contact of my hands with their soft warm flesh a curious sensation, a feeling of ineffable tenderness, came over me: they were mine!

One of them survived long enough to arouse in me such passionate affection as a father may have, when, with nothing else to live for in this world, he makes his child the sole purpose of existence. Almost a year old, she had become such a beautiful little thing, with golden curls that I would wind about my fingers and kiss with a thirst of love that never could be satisfied! She had learned to say "papa" and I would answer "little one"; then she would say "papa" again. We were like birds calling to one another, from treetop to treetop.

She left us on the day, and almost at the very hour, my mother died. I could not find a way to share my anguish and my care between them. When my little girl would fall asleep I would hurry to mother's side. Mamma had no thought for herself, though she knew that she was dying. She talked only of this grandchild of hers, lamenting that she could not see her again and

kiss her for the last time. Nine days this torture lasted. I did not close my eyes for a single second. Should I tell the truth about what followed? Most people, I dare say, would shrink from the confession, human in a very deep humanity though it be. But I must confess that when it was all over, I felt no sorrow whatever at the moment. Rather I was dazed as though I had been struck by a heavy blow. But the point is that then I went to sleep. Just that! I went to sleep. I had to go to sleep; and only when I woke up again did grief for my mother and my little girl assail me—a wild, desperate, ferocious grief, that, while it lasted, was literal madness. One whole night, with I know not what thoughts and intentions in my brain, I wandered aimlessly about the town and the hills and fields surrounding it. I remember that at last I came to the mill on our old "Coops" place. It was early dawn. Filippo, our former miller, was standing on the edge of the flume. He saw me and called me to him. We sat down there under a tree, and he told me stories about my mother and father in the good old days that were no more. I should not take on that way, he said. If mother had gone just then, it was to make things ready for the little girl in the world beyond. There they would find each other, the two of them, and grandma would take baby into her arms and trot her on her knees, never leaving her uncared for, and talking to her always of me.

Three days later I received a check for five hundred lire from brother Berto. I suppose he wanted to compensate me for the nine days torture I had undergone! But the money was offered ostensibly to provide a decent funeral for mamma. Aunt Scolastica, however, had

already attended to that. I put the bank notes away inside an old book in the Library. Later on I took them out and used them on my own account.

They became, as I shall presently narrate, the occasion of my *first* demise.

VI

. . . Click, Click, Click, Click . . .

OF all the things and people in the great salon, the ivory ball, gracefully circling the roulette in a direction opposite to the whirl of the quadrant, seemed alone to be at play:

Click, click, click, click. . . .

The ball alone! Surely this could not be play to the people standing and sitting there with their eyes glued upon that ball, tense in the torment occasioned them by its caprices. To that same ball, on the yellow squares of the table just below, many many hands had brought votive offerings of gold; and, all around, many other hands were nervously fingering more gold—the gold of the next play; while suppliant eyes seemed to pursue the ball in its swift but graceful gyrations: "Where it be thy pleasure, little ball of ivory! Where it be thy pleasure, delightful, cruel, Divinity of Chance!"

I had wandered to Monte Carlo by merest accident—after one of the usual scenes between me, my mother-in-law, and my wife. In the harrowing torture of my recent bereavement, I had no endurance left for this life of quarreling, of bitter nagging, of physical and moral squalor absolute. One day in sheer disgust and quite without premeditation, I went to the old volume where I had put the money from Roberto, transferred

the five hundred lire to my pocket, put on my hat and coat and took to the road.

I started out, on foot, with not a thought except that of escape from the hell in which I had been living. Mechanically, my steps turned toward a neighboring village through which the railroad passed. On the way thither a plan formed vaguely in my mind. I would go to Marseilles, and take a steamer thence to one of the Americas. The money I had with me should suffice—for the steerage at least. Beyond that, I might trust to luck. What could possibly happen to me anywhere worse than what I had been through? Perhaps beyond the horizon ahead a new slavery awaited me—but with heavier chains, I asked myself, than those I had just snapped from my feet? It would be interesting to see a bit of the world, at any rate. And I might even hope to shake off the deadly oppression that had settled on my spirit and was inhibiting all my impulses of ambition and action. To Marseilles, then!

But before I got to Nice my courage failed. Alas! Where was that old capacity for decision that had been one of the virtues of my boyhood? Discouragement must have eaten deeply into the fibre of my being. My will seemed to have decayed, to have been paralysed, in all my sufferings. Five hundred lire! Could I launch out into the unknown on that miserable guarantee? Had I the mental training to win a successful battle for existence in a new and strange environment?

My train was to make a long stop at Nice. When I alighted there, I had virtually decided to go no farther, though I was not resolved to go back home. I compromised by wandering about through the town.

Somewhere on the *Avenue de la Gare* I stopped in

front of a shop with a large gilded sign: *Dépôt de Roulettes de Précision!* Wheels of every description were on show in the windows, with other accessories of gaming, among these, a number of manuals, their paper covers ornamented with pictures of the roulette.

It has often been observed that unhappy people fall ready victims to superstition; however prone they may be thereafter to laugh at the credulity of others and the hopes which belief in luck aroused suddenly in themselves (hopes inevitably deceived, of course!). Well, I remember that when I had read the title of one of those manuals of gambling: "A Sure Method for Winning at Roulette," I walked away from the shop window with a smile of pitying contempt on my lips. Why was it then, that a few steps further on, I stopped, turned around, went back to the shop, and smiling with the same pitying contempt for the stupidity of others, bought a copy of that very manual?

I could make neither head nor tail to what it said. I failed to get a clear idea of what roulette was like, or even of the exact construction of the wheel. But I read on.

"Guess my trouble is with French," I finally concluded. I had never had a lesson in that language. Back in the Library I had looked a grammar through and worked out a text here and there. But I had no notion of French pronunciation, and I had never uttered a word in the strange tongue for fear of making people laugh. This latter preoccupation left me undecided for some time as to whether I ought to enter a gambling house. But then I thought: "Here you were a moment ago starting off for the Americas with barely a cent to your name and without a word of Spanish or English

inside your head. A man as brave as that ought to be brave enough to go as far as the Casino: you know a little French! Besides you have the manual. . . ."

Monte Carlo, I further reflected, was only a short walk from Nice. "Neither my wife nor my mother-in-law know about this money Roberto sent me. I think I'll go and lose it there. That will take away all temptation to run away for good. Perhaps I can manage to save enough for a ticket home; but even if I don't. . . ."

I had heard that the Casino had a beautiful garden with tall—and strong—trees. In the worst case I could take my belt and hang myself to one of these. Dying gratis, and with dignity, that would be indeed! "Who knows how much the poor devil may have lost?" people would say, on finding me!

To tell the truth, I was disappointed in the Casino. The portal, perhaps, was not so bad. Those eight marble columns really made you feel that the architect intended a sort of Temple to the Goddess Fortune. Here, then, was a big door, with side entrances, one to the right and one to the left. My French helped me over the TIREZ inscribed on the latter; and by inference I solved the POUSSEZ on the one in front of me: if "tirez" meant "pull," I could risk "push" on the other.

So I pushed, and I was admitted to the building.

All in bad taste! And something, I think, should be done about it! People, who go to Monte Carlo to leave good money behind, ought at least to have the satisfaction of being skinned in a place somewhat less pretentious and a whole lot more beautiful. All wide-awake towns in Europe are putting up the most attractive slaughterhouses these days—a courtesy wasted, so far as I can see, on the poor unschooled animals that

are killed in them. The fact is, of course, that the great majority of players at Monte Carlo have something else on their minds than the decorations of those five great halls; just as the idlers sitting on the sofas all around are often not in a condition to notice the questionable taste of the upholstery.

* * * * *

Before trying my own luck (with no great hopes, I may say) I thought it would be better to look on a while, and familiarize myself with the manner of the game. And this was by no means so complicated as my manual had led me to suppose. In a few minutes, indeed, I thought I had mastered it. I went, accordingly, to the first table on the left in the first room.

I laid a few francs on a number that came into my head: twenty-five. Most of the people about me followed the whirling ball with a strained nervous expectation. I could not conceal my interest in its flight entirely; but I smiled nonchalantly, despite a curious tickling sensation that seemed to creep around the inside lining of my chest.

The ball slowed up and finally fell upon the quadrant.

"*Vingt-cinq,*" the croupier called; "*rouge, impair, et passe!*"

I had won. I was reaching out to gather up the pile of chips that were tossed upon my ante, when a tall strapping fellow who had been standing behind me pushed my hand aside and gathered in my money. In my faltering French I tried to make him understand that he had made a mistake—oh, yes, by mistake, not intentionally, of course! The man was a German, and spoke French even more falteringly than I. But he

had a brazen courage to make up for any deficiencies in his grammar. He came back at me with vigor, asserting that the mistake was mine and the money his. I looked around the table helplessly. No one breathed a word, not even a neighbor who had made some comment when I put my money on the 25. I looked appealingly at the croupiers in charge of the table. They sat there as passive as statues. "Ah, I see," said I to myself, gathering up the chips I had prepared for another bet. "Here we have a sure method for winning at roulette! Pity they forgot to mention it in the manual. I imagine it's the only sure one, in the end!"

I went to another table, where the game was running high, and stood for some time examining the people seated around it—gentlemen in formal dress for the most part, and several women, more than one of whom seemed of questionable calling. My interest fell, in particular, upon a short light-haired man with big blue eyes, the balls of which were streaked with veins of red, while the lashes were long and almost white. I did not like the looks of him at first; he too was in formal clothes, but such stylish attire did not seem to be in tone on him exactly. I thought him worth watching, however. He laid a heavy stake and lost. He plunged again still more heavily. Again he lost. Not a trace of emotion was visible on his face. "There!" I reflected mentally; "he's not the kind of person to steal the penny or two I risk!" And a certain shame came over me, besides, despite my unfortunate experience at the other table. Here people were throwing money away by the fistfuls, and without a shadow of fear! What a cheap sort I must be to worry about the few francs in my pocket! And here, next to this man, with an

empty chair between, sat a young fellow, his face as pale as wax, a huge monocle on his left eye. He was using only green chips, but he was throwing his money down with an affectation of bored indifference and showing no interest in the ball. Indeed he sat half turned away from the table, twirling his mustache. At the end of a play he would ask a neighbor if he had lost. And he lost every time.

How the money was flying there! Gradually the excitement of the game seized on me as well. I sat down between the two men and began to place my chips now on this number and now on that. My first bets all went against me; but then suddenly I began to feel a very strange sensation creeping over me—a sort of inspired supernatural intoxication, that took me out of myself, making me the automatic agent of unconscious intuitions from within. Why this number rather than any other? "There, that square at the end—on the right! Yes!" I was absolutely sure the number was going to win; and win it did. My bets were small at first; but soon I was throwing out my money without counting it. The longer I played, the clearer my strange power of drunken divination seemed to grow, nor did my confidence wane when I suffered a loss or two; in fact, I imagined I had foreseen such breaks in my luck, and I had even said to myself more than once: "Yes, this time I am going to lose—I must lose!" And now I was quite beside myself: I had a sudden impulse to risk everything I had, my original bet and all that I had won. My guess came out! It was getting too much for me: my ears were buzzing and I began to sweat. One of the croupiers noticed my persistent good fortune. I thought I caught a challenge in the glance he gave me.

Never mind! Let's try again! Again I pushed everything I had upon the board. I remember that my hand stopped on the number 35, the same number that had won before. That was a bad chance! I started to change; but no, a voice within me seemed to whisper: "Stay where you are!" I closed my eyes, and I must have grown as pale as death. A great silence fell over the table as though everyone were sharing in my terrible anxiety. The ball started round and round. And round and round it whirled! Would it never stop? Now it was going a little more slowly, but that seemed only to exasperate my torture. Click! It had fallen. I did not open my eyes. But I knew what the croupier was going to say (his voice when it sounded seemed to come from far far away as from a distant world):

"Trente-cinq, noir, impair, et passe!"

I raked in the pile of money and left the table. I had to go! I was too weak to continue playing; and when I walked it was with the stagger of a drunken man. I collapsed on a divan, at the end of my endurance, my head sinking on the back of a chair. Yes! Sleep! I needed sleep! A little nap would do me good. And I was almost yielding, when a sudden sense of heaviness about me restored my consciousness with a shock. How much had I won? I looked up, but I had to close my eyes again. The great hall of the Casino seemed to be whirling dizzily round and round. How hot it was in there! How stifling! A breath of air! Yes, a breath of air! What, dark already? The lights were coming on! How long had I been playing?

I rose with difficulty to my feet, and left the room.

* * * * *

Outside, in the atrium, night had not yet fallen; and a breath of the cool bracing air revived me. A number of people were about, some of them walking up and down by themselves, concerned with their own thoughts; others in groups of two or three, chatting, smoking, joking. They were all objects of interest to me. I was still a stranger to the Casino, and conscious of looking the greenhorn too. I began carefully to watch such as appeared most at their ease. But how could one ever tell? When I should least have expected such a thing, one of them would suddenly fall silent, toss his cigarette aside, and pale, haggard, distraught, start off toward the play rooms again, pursued by the laughter of his companions. What was the joke? I could not see; but instinctively, I would join in the laugh, looking after the fugitive with a silly smile on my face.

"*A toi, mon chéri!*" I heard a harsh female voice whisper behind me. I turned around. It was one of the women who had been sitting near me at the table. She was holding out a rose toward me, keeping another for herself. She had just bought them at the buffet there in the outer hall. A flash of anger came over me! So I did look like an easy mark!

I refused the flower without a "thank you," and started to walk away. But she broadened her smile into a frank laugh, and taking me confidentially by the arm she began to talk to me hurriedly and in a half whisper. She was proposing, so I understood after a fashion, that we play together, in view of the luck she had seen me having. I would choose the numbers and she would divide earnings fifty fifty with me. I tore my arm loose, with a show of anger, and left her standing there.

Shortly afterward, I wandered back into the gaming rooms. There I saw the same woman again, but talking now with a short dark-complexioned fellow with a bushy beard—a Spaniard, as I judged—whose appearance I did not like. She had given him the rose just previously offered to me. They both winced at my approach, and I was sure they had been talking about me. I decided to keep on my guard. Sauntering off toward another room, I approached the first table there, without however intending to play. Sure enough! I had not been there long when the Spaniard put in an appearance, but without the woman, taking up a position near me, though pretending not to be aware of my presence. I turned and fixed my eyes frankly upon him, to let him know that I had noticed his attentions and was not to be trifled with. And yet, as I now began to think, he might not be the swindler I was taking him for! He laid three heavy bets in succession, and lost all three, winking his eyelids furiously at each defeat, perhaps in an effort to conceal the shock of disappointment. After the third throw, he looked up at me and smiled. I left him there and went back into the other room to the table where I had made my heavy winnings.

The croupiers had changed. The woman was again in the seat where I had observed her first. I kept off some distance from the table so that she would not see me. Her bets were all small, and she did not play every round. I stepped forward to the table. She was about to lay down a chip; but when she noticed me, she withheld her money with the intention, evidently, of putting it on the number I should choose. But I did not play. As the croupier called *"Le jeu est fait! Rien ne va plus!"* I looked at her: she was shaking a finger at

me with a smile of reproach. I kept out of the game for some time; but gradually the spell caught me again. The animation about the table was too pervasive. Besides I seemed to feel my strange inspiration coming over me again. I sat down in the first chair that became empty, forgot all about the woman, and began to play.

What was the source of that mysterious foresight I had for choosing the right number and color unfailingly? Was it just luck—the wildest craziest luck man ever had? Was it a sort of miraculous divination beyond the control of my consciousness? How explain, at any rate, certain obstinate obsessions of mine, the very absurdity of which now makes my hair stand on end, as I reflect that I was risking everything, perhaps even my life, on some of those bets that were just mad impudent challenges to Fortune? However you may account for it, I know how I felt: I felt the presence of a devilish power within me, which, at that particular time, made Fortune my captive, rendered her obedient to my every gesture and bent her caprice to my will. I felt this, I say; but I was not the only one to feel it. Others about the table soon acquired the same conviction; and shortly everybody was betting on the numbers that I kept choosing for risks of the most hazardous kind. Why was it I stuck to red for turn after turn—and why did red always come out? And why was it I would switch to zero, just as zero was about to fall? Even the young man with the monocle began at last to take a direct interest in the game; and a fat man beside him to pant louder than ever. A fever of excitement ran about our table—shivers of impatience, moments of nervous gasping suspense, bursts of anxious expectancy that attained climaxes of veritable fury.

Eventually the croupiers themselves lost their stiff, impassive, well-mannered indifference.

Suddenly, after pushing a pile of chips forward on the table, I felt myself give way. A sense of tremendous responsibility came over me. I had eaten practically nothing since morning; and all the emotions of that violent evening had exhausted my strength. My head began to swim, and I could not go on. I won the bet, but I drew back from the table.

And now I felt a strong grip fasten itself upon my arm. It was that short, squatty, bushy-faced Spaniard, beside himself with excitement, and determined, at all costs, to make me continue playing. "Look," he said. "Eleven and fifteen. We come to last three rounds. Play! We break bank!"

He had decided I was an Italian and was addressing me in my own language, but with a Spanish brogue that, done for as I was, made me laugh. I had just enough strength left to persist mechanically, obstinately, in a refusal: "No, no! I've had enough! I've had enough! Let me go, sir! Let me go, sir!"

He let me go; but he followed me, even boarding my train to accompany me back to Nice. He insisted that I take a midnight meal with him, and engage a room in the hotel where he was living. At first I was not loath to accept the almost awe-struck admiration which this fellow had for me as for a master of divination. I have noticed that human vanity is inclined to sniff with pleasure even the acrid and stupefying incense that rises from the most petty and miserable of censers. My own case was that of a general who by sheer luck, quite beyond any provision or plan of his own, has stumbled on a decisive victory. And this reflection be-

gan actually to take form in my own mind, as, little by little, I came out of my bewilderment, recovered a part of my strength, and grew conscious of the annoyance this man's company was really giving me.

However, though I bade him good-night in the station at Nice, he would have none of it. He took me off to supper with him by main force. And then it was that he confessed to having sent the woman to me in the lobby of the Casino. She was one of the habitual idlers about the place; and for three days he had been providing her with funds for "a start in life"—giving her, that is, a hundred francs every now and then, on the chance that eventually she might make a real killing. Following my numbers that evening, she must have won something at last; for she was not waiting for the Spaniard in the lobby:

"What I can do?" said he resignedly. "She probably find a better looking man. I too old! *Quizà,* I thank God, segnore, He send her away so soon!"

My importunate friend had been at Nice for a week or more; and every morning he had gone to the Casino. Up to that evening, he had done nothing but lose. What he wanted now was the secret of my success: either I must have learned the game to the bottom or have devised an unfailing system. This made me laugh; and I assured him I had never seen a roulette wheel before that morning, and that I was as surprised as any one else at my unheard-of good luck. But he was not convinced. He decided, I imagine, that he was dealing with a sharper of no ordinary merits; for he returned to the attack after a skillful detour; and in his curiously fluent gibberish, half Spanish, half God knows what, eventually

came out with the proposal he had tried to make to me that evening through the girl.

"But, my dear sir," I answered, half amused and half angered by his insistence, and the assumptions it implied. "I have no system: how can there be any science to a game like that? I had luck, that's all. Tomorrow I may lose everything. On the other hand I may win again—as I hope I shall!"

"But why you not provech today of your good fortune?"

"Provech?"

"Yes, provech, profit, how you say?"

"Why, I did, considering the few francs I started with!"

"Good! I pay for you. You, luck, I, money?"

"But I might lose it all for you! Look here, señor: if you are so sure I'm going to win, you do tomorrow just as you did today: put your money on my numbers; then if I lose, you can't blame me; and if I win . . ."

He did not let me finish:

"Eh no, segnore; no; today, yes, I do this. But tomorrow, no, I do not! You bet *conmigo* strong? Good! I play! If no, I no play *seguramente. Muchas gracias!*"

I looked at the man, trying to fathom the meaning of all this chatter. The one thing certain was that he suspected me of some trick or other. I flushed and demanded an explanation. He suppressed the shrewd smile that had been playing about his lips, although the leer in it continued to dominate his expression:

"I say no—I no play. *No digo altro!*"

I brought my fist down solidly on the table in front of me.

"No, you don't get out of this that way!" I answered

angrily. "What's the meaning of what you said, and of that fool smile of yours? I don't see anything to laugh at!"

He grew pale, as I raised my voice, and seemed to cringe before me. I felt sure an apology was coming. However, I shrugged my shoulders and rose from the table:

"Anyhow, I don't care what you meant! But I want nothing more to do with you!"

I paid my bill and left the restaurant.

* * * * *

I once knew a man who, from his extraordinary endowments of intellect, was worthy of the most venerating admiration. He never received any whit of it, however, and all on account of a pair of checkered trousers (gray and black if I remember rightly and fitting too tight to his legs) which he would wear, come what may. Our clothes have something, it may be about their cut, it may be about their color, which gives people the strangest impressions of us.

Take my present case. I thought I had a right to be put out. I was not in a dinner coat, of course; but I was quite decently dressed in a black suit in keeping with my state of mourning. Well, from the very same outfit that miserable German thought I was enough of an idiot to risk his stealing my pot; while now this Spaniard took me for a rascal so deeply dyed in the wool that he was afraid of me! "Must be these whiskers," I concluded as I hurried along, "or the way my hair is cut. I am clipped pretty close. On the other hand, my beard is a bit too scraggly!"

Meanwhile I was anxious to get to a hotel to see how much I had really won. It was two o'clock by this time and the streets were deserted. Eventually, a cab came rattling by. I hailed it, and got in.

I was a walking cash-box; I had money in the pockets of my coat, in the pockets of my vest, in the pockets of my trousers, everywhere—gold, silver, paper. The total must have been an enormous one. As soon as I reached a room, I spread my earnings out on the bed. Eleven thousand lire! I had not seen any money for such a long time that I thought it was a fortune that had thus come to me almost without effort on my part. But then my mind reverted to the good old days of the prosperity of my family, and a bitter sense of my degradation came over me. Indeed! Two years there in that library—along with my other misfortunes—had so crushed me that a paltry two thousand dollars could look like wealth?

My old feeling of discouragement returned.

"Here, you tame spineless virtuous librarian," I apostrophized, looking at all my gold contemptuously. "Run along home and pass this over to the widow Pescatore. She will be sure you stole it; and your stock will go up in her esteem on that account. Or rather, sail on to America as you had planned, if this windfall does not seem a fitting reward for your courageous efforts hitherto. You could, now, you see; you have two thousand dollars to bank on! What a millionaire!"

I swept the money together, tossed it into a drawer of my dresser, and went to bed. But I could not get to sleep. What was I really to do? Go back to Monte Carlo and lose the money I had made? Or should I rest content with this one stroke of fortune, lay it aside

somewhere, and enjoy it modestly as occasion offered? Enjoy it! A pretty thought for a man stuck with a family like mine! Well, I might buy my wife some better clothes. Romilda seemed not only to have grown indifferent as to whether I liked her or not, but even to take particular pains to prove odious to me—never fixing her hair, going around in ugly mules all day long, and wearing an old wrapper that left her not a single charm of figure. Did she feel that it wasn't worth the trouble to dress decently for a husband like me? For that matter, she had never quite recovered from her long illness; and she was growing more irritable and despondent from day to day—not toward me alone, but toward everybody. Slovenliness, laziness, were the natural result of her many disappointments and the lack of any real affection on her part for me. She had taken no interest in our one little girl who had survived; because that child was a defeat for her as compared with the fine boy that had come to Oliva barely a month later—and with none of the trials and torments that had fallen to Romilda's lot. All these things—and that friction, besides, which develops inevitably when poverty, like a black cat of ill-omen, huddles in the ashes of a joyless hearth—had made married life unbearable to both of us. Would eleven thousand lire cure all that? Would eleven thousand lire resurrect a love that had been traitorously slain in its early days by the widow Pescatore? Nonsense! To America then! But why America? Why go seeking Fortune so far away, if, as it seemed, that very Fortune had halted me, almost by violence, in front of a gambling store in Nice? No! I must show some appreciation for such a courtesy—play the game. Everything or nothing!

After all, ruin would leave me only where I was before. Eleven thousand lire! What was that?

So, the next day, I went back to Monte Carlo, as indeed I did for twelve successive days. In all that time, I had neither leisure nor opportunity to wonder at the amazing fortune that attended me, so completely was I absorbed in the game—even to the point of utter madness. And I have not wondered much since, in view of the turn my luck finally took after favoring me so absurdly. In nine days of reckless playing I amassed a sum of money that must truly have been prodigious. On the tenth, I began to lose, and my ruin was just as phenomenal. My intuition came to fail me, as though there were not sufficient energy left in my nerves to sustain it. I was not shrewd enough—or rather, I lacked the physical strength—to stop in time. I did stop, as a matter of fact; but not of my own accord. My salvation came from one of those horrible spectacles that are not infrequent, they say, at Monte Carlo.

I was entering the Casino on the morning of the twelfth day, when a gentleman I had often met about the tables came up to me in great alarm and announced more by his excited gestures than by actual words that a man had just killed himself outside in the gardens. Somehow I felt sure it was my Spaniard, and a twinge of remorse ran through me. After our talk at supper that first evening, he had refused to follow my game, and had lost consistently. Then seeing me continue my lucky play, he had finally begun to imitate me. But by this time, my own good fortune was coming to an end, and I had taken to going about from one table to another. In this way I had lost sight of him, and he had lost interest in me.

As I hurried to join the crowd that had gathered about the body, I tried to imagine how he would look stretched out there on the ground, dead. However, I found, not him, but the young man with the monocle who had affected such indifference to the great sums he was losing that he always sat with his back to the wheel. He was lying in such a natural posture that it seemed he must have taken that position before firing the fatal shot. One arm was eased along his body; the other was raised to one side, the hand closed and the forefinger bent as for the clutch of the revolver. The weapon was lying a few inches away, and a little beyond, the boy's hat. His face was covered with blood, which had clotted thick in the socket of one of his eyes. Still more blood had flowed out from his right temple upon the sand of the driveway. Horseflies were already buzzing about; and one of them alighted on his face. None of the spectators seemed inclined to interfere. Finally I stepped forward, drew a handkerchief from my pocket and spread it over the poor fellow's head. The crowd was irritated rather than not at this decent act of mine: I had spoiled the spectacle if anything!

Then I took to my heels and ran. I ran to the station, boarded the first train for Nice, gathered up my belongings, and started for home again.

I counted the remnants of my winnings. I still had eighty-two thousand lire left.

Could I ever have dreamed that before evening of that day something similar to the fate of this young man was to come to me?

VII

I Change Cars

"FIRST I'll get 'The Coops' out of Purgatory, and go to live there, working the mill. Good idea to keep close to the soil—better still if you can get under it. . . .

"Any trade, when you think of it, has its good points. . . . Even a grave digger's. . . . A miller has the satisfaction of hearing the stones go round . . . and the flour flies all about and covers you white. . . . Some fun in that. . . .

"Bet they haven't opened a bag of grain in that mill in a dog's age . . . but the moment I take hold of it. . . .

"Signor Mattia, the belt is off the fly-wheel! Eh, Signor Mattia, need a new shaft here! This gear is loose, Signor Mattia! . . . As it was in the old days, when mamma was still alive and Malagna was running things. . . .

"While I'm busy at the mill, I'll have to have somebody look after the farming . . . and he'll skin the eye-teeth out of me! . . . Or, if I attend to that myself, my miller will do me at the mill. . . . A sort of see-saw . . . miller up, farm-hand down, farm-hand up, miller down . . . I sitting in the middle, to balance and enjoy the performance. . . .

"Ah, I have it . . . I get into one of those old chests where the widow keeps the clothes of the late Francesco Antonio Pescatore . . . in camphor and moth balls . . . like holy relics . . . dress her up in a suit of them . . . and let her be miller . . . and run the other fellow too, for that matter, while I continue holding down my job at old Boccamazza's library. . . . And life in the country would do Romilda good. . . ."

Such my rambling thoughts as the train ran along. I could not close my eyes, but the vivid picture of that boy lying there on the driveway at Monte Carlo . . . so naturally, so much at ease, under the green trees, in the cool of the bright morning . . . would crowd its way to the forefront of my mind. Or, if I succeeded in expelling that horrible vision, another, less bloody but not less terrifying, would take its place: the picture of my mother-in-law and my wife, waiting for me at home.

I had been gone just two weeks minus one day. . . . How would they welcome my return? I amused myself building up the scene in anticipation. . . .

I walk into the house. . . .

The two of them . . . just a glance, a glance of supreme indifference, as much as to say:

"Huh, back again? And without your neck broken, worse luck!"

For a time, everybody mum, they on their side, I on mine. . . .

Then the widow pipes up. . . . "How about that job you've gone and lost?"

That's so! When I went away, I took the library key off in my pocket. . . . I fail to show up, so the constable breaks down the door. I am nowhere to be found. . . . Reported missing! . . . No news from me any-

where. . . . Four, five, six days . . . and they give the place to some other loafer like me. . . .

So then. . . . "What is His Royal Highness doing here? Waiting for his dinner? No sir. . . . Been off on a toot for a week or so, eh? Well, you've found your level! Stick to it! But there's no obligation on two hard-working women to support a vagrant about the house! Off on a tear . . . with who knows what gutter-wench. . . ."

And I . . . mum as an oyster. . . .

And the old woman growing madder and madder, because she can't get a word out of me. . . .

I, in fact, still mum as an oyster. . . .

Until, when she's really blowing off steam . . . I take a little bundle out of my inside pocket . . . and begin to count it out on the table . . . two . . . six . . . ten thousand, in that pile . . . five, seven . . . ten thousand, in that pile . . . forty, fifty, sixty. . . . (Four eyes and two mouths wide open: "Who have you been holding up now?" . . .)

". . . seventy thousand, seventy-five thousand . . . eighty . . . eighty-one thousand seven hundred and twenty-five . . . and forty centimes for good measure! . . ."

And I gather up the money, stuff it into my purse, put it into my pocket, and get up. . . .

"So you're firing me out? Better than I hoped for! Thanks! Goodbye and good luck, fair ladies! . . ."

And I laughed aloud. . . . The people in my compartment had been watching me as I sat there gloating over my triumph. . . . They tried to suppress their mirth when I looked up. . . .

To conceal my humiliation under a scowl, I applied

myself to the question of my creditors, who would pounce upon me the moment reports of all that money got around. . . .

"No hiding such a sum. . . . Besides what's the use of money if you can't use it? . . . A slim chance of spending any of it on myself. . . . Well, so I start in business at the mill, with the income from the farm on the side . . . but there's the overhead and the repairs . . . money here, money there . . . years and years before I could pay them all off . . . whereas, for cash, they'd probably settle for little or nothing. . . ."

I went into this latter recourse, dividing my bank notes up between the lot of them:

"That pig-snout of a Recchioni . . . ten thousand. . . . And five more for Filippo Brisigo . . . wish to God it was for his funeral . . . seven to Lunaro, the old skinflint. Turin was a better place, after he left . . . and old woman Lippani. . . . That's about all, I guess. . . . No . . . there's also Della Piana, and there's Bossi, and there's Margottini . . . and—Good God, the whole blamed eighty is gone. . . . So I was working for those people up at Monte Carlo? Why the devil didn't I stop after I won that pile. . . . But for those last two days, I could pay them all, and still be a rich man. . . ."

By this time I was swearing under my breath, and my fellow passengers laughed aloud without restraint. I hitched nervously about in my seat. . . . Daylight was fading from the windows of the car. . . . The air was dry and dusty. Ugh! What a nuisance, a railroad train! Anything to kill time. . . .

I thought I might read myself to sleep . . . so I bought a newspaper at a station just across the Italian

frontier. . . . The electric lights came on. I unfolded the paper and started on the front page.

Interesting! . . . The Castle of Valencay sold at auction! Two million three hundred thousand francs! Counting the lands that go with it, the largest single holding in France! Count de Castellane bought it in. . . .

"Same way I lost "The Coops," I guess!"

The King of Spain, at one thirty today, entertained a delegation of Moroccan chiefs at luncheon at the Palace. . . . The mission then paid its respects to the Queen. . . .

"Must have been a good feed."

Paris, the 28th. Envoys from Tibet bringing gifts from the Lama to the President of France.

"What the deuce is a Lama! . . . Thought it was a kind of camel. . . ."

I did not settle the point, for I fell asleep.

I was awakened by the bumping of my car, as the brakes stopped us short. We were coming into another station. I looked at my watch. Eight fifteen. . . . In another hour I would be arriving at my destination.

The newspaper was still open on my knees. I skipped the item about the Lama and turned the page. My eyes fell on a head-line in extra-heavy type:

SUICIDE

Supposing the story referred to the tragedy of that morning at Monte Carlo, I straightened up to read it more carefully. . . . At the first line, which was printed in very small type, I stopped in surprise. "Special despatch, by telegraph, from Miragno."

Miragno? Who's been killing himself down there in my village?

I read on:

"Yesterday, the 28th, a body, in an advanced state of decomposition, was discovered in the mill-flume of the farm called . . . ."

At this point my sight seemed suddenly to go blurred, for I thought the next word was a name familiar to me. The lighting in the compartment was very dim, and that added to the difficulty I experienced in reading with my one eye. I stood up to bring the paper closer to the bulbs . . .

". . . decomposition, was discovered in the mill-flume of the farm called 'The Coops,' located about two miles from this town. The police were notified and proceeded to the spot. The body was recovered from the water and, as the law requires, laid out on the bank under guard, for an inquest by the State's physician. The corpse was later identified as that of our . . ."

My heart leapt to my throat, and in utter bewilderment I looked about at my companions. They were all asleep.

"body was recovered . . . laid out on the bank . . . identified as that of our . . ."

"I? I?"

". . . by the State's physician. The corpse was later identified as that of our village librarian, Mattia Pascal, who has been missing for some days. Financial troubles are assigned as the cause of the tragedy."

"I? Missing? Identified? . . . Mattia Pascal?"

A ferocious grin upon my face, my heart thumping tumultuously in my breast, I read and reread the lines, I know not how many times. At a first impulse, all my

being rebelled in bitter protest, as though that cold, laconic item in the news required a denial from me, to convince even myself that it was not true. True it was for other people, at any rate; and the conviction—already a day old—that they had of my death impressed me as a crushing, overwhelming, intolerable act of violence unjustly delivered against me, leaving me destroyed for ever. My eyes turned wildly again upon my fellow passengers. Could they be thinking so too? There they sat, sleeping, snoring, in various positions of torture. I felt like shaking them all awake, to scream into their faces that it was not, that it could not be, true.

"But I must be dreaming!"

I caught up the paper again to read the item once more.

I was in a frenzy of excitement. Should I not pull the emergency brake and stop the train? No! Well —what was it poking along that way for? Its monotonous, grinding, bumping, rattling grated on my nerves till I was in a paroxysm of irritation. I opened and closed my hands spasmodically, sinking my nails into my palms. Again I unfolded the paper, holding the two sheets out flat before me, my two arms extended. . . . Then I folded it up again, with the article on the outside. But I knew what it said, by heart.

"Identified! How? How could they have identified me? In an advanced state of decomposition . . . a-a-ah!"

I thought of myself for a moment floating there in the green water of the Flume—my body blackened, swollen, bursting, disgusting to look upon. . . . With a shudder

of horrified loathing, I crossed my arms over my breast, pinching my biceps with either hand:

"I? No, not I! . . . Who can it have been? Someone like me, certainly . . . my beard, perhaps . . . my build. . . . And they identified me! . . .

" 'Missing for some days.' . . . A-ah yes! But one thing I should like to know: I should like to know who was in such a hurry to get me identified? That poor devil . . . as much like me as all that? Just like me—clothes, everything? Ah, I see! It was she . . . it was Marianna Dondi . . . that Pescatore woman! Hoping it would be I, she made it so! She identified me, at once, off hand! Too good almost to be true! Just hear her taking on: 'Oh my poor, poor boy! Oh my poor, poor Mattia! Yes, it's he! It's he! What will my daughter ever do now . . . !' And she probably found a few tears too—and improvised a scene beside the corpse! The poor devil was too dead to boot her out of there with a 'Give us a rest: I don't know you!' "

I was quite beside myself. The train drew into another station and came to a stop. I threw open the side door and jumped to the ground, with the idea of doing something about it immediately—a telegram perhaps contradicting the report of my death. But I struck so hard upon the platform of the station, that I was jarred from head to foot; and to that I owed my salvation. For a sudden realization flashed through my mind, as though the stupid obsession that had taken hold on me had been shaken loose:

"Of course! Freedom! Liberty! Why did you not think of it before? Freedom! Freedom! The chance for a new life!"

Eighty-two thousand lire in my inside pocket, and

no obligations to anyone. I was dead! And a dead man has no debts! A dead man has no wife! A dead man has no mother-in-law! What more could a fellow ask for? I was free, free, free!

I must have had a very queer look as I stood there beside my car with this new inspiration written over my face. In any case, I had left the compartment door open behind me; and I was suddenly aware of a number of trainmen calling to me, I did not know why. One of them ran up to me at last, shook me by the arm, and shouted angrily: "Get aboard, man! The train is starting!"

"Let her start!" I answered. "Let her start! I'm changing cars!"

But now a terrifying doubt came into my mind. That report—supposing it had already been denied? Supposing people at Miragno had discovered the mistake —relatives of the dead man perhaps, making a real identification. . . . Before counting my chickens, I had better wait for them to hatch. . . . I ought to get confirmation of the whole story. And how, how?

I felt for the newspaper in my pockets, but, unfortunately, I had left it in the train. Instinctively my eyes turned down along the deserted track that stretched away into the night, its two lines of cold steel shining bright from the lamps of the station. A pang of utter loneliness came over me and for a second I quite lost my head again. What a nightmare! And supposing it were all just a dream! But no . . . I had really read the thing: "Special despatch, by telegraph, from Miragno, yesterday, the 28th. . . .

"You see? You can say it over word for word! No

dream then! And yet . . . well, you need proof, more proof than that!''

Where was I, anyhow?

I looked for the sign on the front of the station: ALENGA.

Not much of a place! And it was Sunday, too. Poor chance of a fellow's finding a newspaper in that hole on a holiday! And yet, Miragno was not so far away! Well, at Miragno, that morning, there must have been an edition of the *Compendium*, the only paper published in the neighborhood. I must get a copy, somehow. The *Compendium* would be sure to have the story, down to the last detail. But Alenga! How expect anybody in Alenga to have the *Compendium*? But I could telegraph. Ah, that was an idea! I could telegraph—assumed name of course! I could telegraph to the editor—Miro Colzi—everybody knew Miro Colzi—the ''Meadow Lark'' as we called him, after he got out a volume of poems—his first and last—under that title. But the ''Meadow Lark!'' Wouldn't he think it suspicious to be getting an order for his paper from Alenga? Certainly the leading story for that issue—the paper was a weekly—would be my suicide. Wouldn't there be some risk in telegraphing—telegraphing especially for that particular number?

''But, no, how could there be?'' I then thought. ''Colzi will have it in his head that I am dead! Meantime he has ambitions of his own. He is attacking this administration on the water and gas question. He'll imagine people here have heard about him and want to read his last editorial.''

I went along into the station.

Luckily the mail carrier had stopped for a chat with

the freight agent; and his wagon was still there. It was some four miles from the station to the village of Alenga proper, and uphill all the way.

I climbed into the rickety cart; and we drove off into the dark, without lights on the wagon of any kind.

There were many things for me to think about; and yet, from time to time, in the black solitude all about me now, I would be overwhelmed by the same violent emotion I had received in the train from the reading of that disconcerting piece of news. It was that same sense of loneliness I had experienced at sight of the rails of the deserted track, a feeling of fear and uneasiness, as though I were the ghost of my dead self, astray somewhere, cut off from life, and yet certain to continue living, beyond my death, without knowing just how.

To shake off my uncanny oppression, I struck up a conversation with my driver.

"Is there a news agency at Alenga?"

"Agency?—No, sir!"

"What? Can't you buy a newspaper in the place?"

"Ah, newspapers! Yes, you can get them from Grottanelli, at the drug store!"

"I suppose there's a hotel?"

"There's a boarding house—Palmentino's."

We had come to a steep incline; and the man got down from his seat to make a lighter load for his poor winded nag. In the almost total darkness I could scarcely distinguish his figure as he walked along. But at one point he stopped to light his pipe, and I could see him clearly. A shudder ran over me: "If he only knew who it is he has with him tonight . . . !"

But then I turned the same query upon myself!

"Well, who is it he has with him! I couldn't say! Who am I? I shall have to decide. I need a name, at least—and before long! When they send the telegram, I shall have to give them a name to sign; and I mustn't be embarrassed when they ask for one at the boarding house. Yes, a name—just a name will do, for a starter. Let's see: what is my name?"

I should never have dreamed it would be so hard to find a name, especially a last name. I began fitting syllables together just as they cam into my mind; and I got all sorts of queer things as a result! "Strozzani," "Parbetta," "Martoni," "Bartusi." Ugh!

The problem began to grip my nerves. The names I found seemed all so meaningless, so empty!—"Nonsense! As though names needed to have meanings! Come, pull yourself together! Anything will do! You had Martoni! What's the matter with Martoni? Charles Martoni—there you are!" But a moment later, I would shrug my shoulders! "Yes, Charles—Martel!" And so, all over again!

We arrived at the village and still I had failed to make up my mind. Fortunately there was no occasion for using a name for the druggist, who proved to be telegraph clerk, postal clerk, pharmacist, stationer, newsboy, all around donkey, and I don't know what else.

I bought copies of the newspapers he had in stock, the *Corriere* and the *Secolo* from Milan, the *Caffaro,* and one or two others, from Genoa.

"I don't suppose you have the *Compendium* of Miragno?"

Grottanelli had a pair of big round owl's eyes, that looked like balls of glass. Every so often he would force a pair of stiff, thick eyelids down over them.

"The *Compendium?* of Miragno? . . . Never heard of it!"

"It's a small town sheet, weekly, I believe! I thought I would like to see it—today's number, that is!"

"The *Compendium?* Miragno? Never heard of it!" And he kept repeating this, stolidly.

"That doesn't matter. Few people have! Nevertheless, I've got to have ten or dozen copies of the thing right away. Can you get them for me? I'll pay the expenses for telegraphing the order tonight."

The man made no answer. A blank expression on his face, he persisted still: "The *Compendium?* Miragno? Never heard of it!" But he finally consented to make up the telegram, at my dictation, and to give his store as the address.

It was a horrible night I passed there in the boarding house of Palmentino's, a sleepless night of distracted tossing on a sea of tumultuous thoughts and worries. But the afternoon mail of the following day brought me fifteen copies of the *Compendium.*

The Genoa papers of the day before had said nothing whatever about the tragedy at Miragno; and now my hands trembled as I opened the bundle before me.

On the first page, nothing. Feverishly I turned to the inner sheets.

Ah! Across two columns of the third page ran lines of mourning in heavy black. Under them was my name in big broadfaced type:

MATTIA PASCAL

"He had been missing for some days—days of consternation and unspeakable anguish for his family, and

of concern for the people of this town who had learned to love Mattia Pascal for that goodness of heart and joviality of temperament which, with his other gifts of character, enabled him to meet misfortune with dignity and courage, and to fall, without loss of public esteem, from the moneyed ease that once was his to the humble circumstances in which he lived in recent years.

"After a day of unexplained absence on his part, his family went, in some alarm, to the Boccamazza Library where Mattia Pascal, passionately devoted to his work as a public servant, spent most of his time, enriching with wide and varied readings his native endowments as a scholar. The door of the Library was closed and locked, a fact which at first gave rise to very grave suspicions. For the moment, however, these were shown to be groundless; and it was hoped that our beloved Librarian had slipped out of town on private business which he had divulged to no one. But alas, the sorry truth was soon to be revealed. The death of his mother, whom he adored, and on the same day, of his only child, together with financial worries arising from the loss of his ancestral properties, had shaken our poor friend too deeply!

"It seems that, on a previous occasion, some three months ago, Mattia Pascal tried to put an end to his unhappy days in the very water where his body has just been found—the mill-flume of the estate known as 'The Coops,' which, in days gone by, had been one of the prides of the Pascal inheritance. We got the story from a former employee of the family, Filippo Brina, miller on the farm. Standing there beside the corpse—it was night, and two policemen, with lanterns, were on guard about the body—the old man with tears in his

eyes, told the reporter of the *Compendium* how he had prevented the grieving son and father from executing his violent intention at that time. But Filippo Brina could not always be on hand. On his second attempt to end his own life, Mattia Pascal threw himself into the Flume and there his body lay for two whole days.

"There was a heartrending scene when, night before last, the desperate widow was led down to the water's edge to view the now unrecognizable remains of her loved companion who had gone to join his daughter and his mother in the other world.

"In token of sympathy for her bereavement and of esteem for the departed, the people of the town turned out, en masse, to accompany the body to its last resting place, over which our Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Gerolamo Pomino, Chevalier of the Crown, pronounced a touching eulogy.

"The *Compendium* extends to the bereaved family and to Mr. Roberto Pascal, brother of the deceased and formerly a resident of this town, expressions of its sincerest sympathy. *Vale, dilecte amice, vale!*

M. C."

Though I should have been quite dismayed had I found nothing in the paper, I must confess that my name, printed there, under that black line, did not give me the pleasure I had expected. On the contrary, it filled me with such painful emotions that after a few lines I had to give up. That touch about the "consternation" and "anguish" of my "bereaved" family did not amuse me at all; nor did the bosh about the "esteem" of my fellow townsmen, or my "passionate" devotion to my work a public servant. Rather I was

impressed by the reference to the night of mourning I had passed at "The Coops" after the death of mother and my little girl. The fact that that had served as a proof, indeed as the strongest proof, of my suicide at first surprised me as an unforeseen and cynical irony of fate. Then it caused me shame and remorse.

No, I had no right to the profits of such a cruel misunderstanding. I had not killed myself in sorrow for my two dearest ones, though the thought of doing so had indeed occurred to me that night. To be sure, I had run away, in sheer despair at that great bereavement. But here I was on my way home again; and from a gambling house where Fortune had smiled on me in the strangest manner!

Just as she was continuing to smile! For here, now, if you please, someone else, someone surely whom I did not even know, had killed himself in my place; and, depriving this benefactor of mine of the pity and the sorrow of friends and relatives which rightfully belonged to him, I was also compelling him to submit to the hypocritical weeping of my wife and my mother-in-law and even to a eulogy from the painted lips of Mr. Gerolamo Pomino!

Yes, these were my first impressions on reading my obituary in the Miragno *Compendium*. But then I reflected that, of course, the poor fellow had not really died on my account, and that I could not render him the slightest service by coming to life again. The fact that I would gain incidentally from his misfortune imposed no sacrifice on his people. Indeed I would be doing them a favor by keeping still. In their eyes, the suicide was I, Mattia Pascal. They could still hope

that their man had simply disappeared, that he might return again almost any day.

As for my wife and my mother-in-law, did I owe them any consideration in the matter? All that "anguish," all that "consternation"—was it really so? Were they not, more probably, phrases, invented by the "Meadow Lark"? To make sure whether it was I or not, all they had to do, was lift the eyelid of my left eye! And anyhow—even if there had been no eyes left—a woman isn't fooled so easily as that where her own husband is concerned! Why were they so anxious to have it me? Doubtless the widow Pescatore hoped that Malagna would feel just a little bit responsible for my terrible end, and come to the rescue of his poor "niece" again.

Well, if that was their game, why should I try to spoil it?

"Dead? Buried? That suits me! A cross on the grave, and good-bye, fair ladies!"

I arose from the table where I had been reading, stretched my arms and legs deliciously and heaved a deep sigh of relief.

VIII

Adriano Meis

STRAIGHTWAY, not so much to deceive other people —they had deceived themselves, you understand, and with a haste and readiness which may not have been without some justification in my case, but which still was a trifle too precipitous—as to take my cue from Fortune and to satisfy a real need of my own, I set out to make myself over into another man.

I had scant reason to be proud of the miserable failure whom the people back home had insisted on drowning—whether he liked it or not—in the waters of a mill-flume. In view of the life he had led up to that time, the late Mattia Pascal deserved, surely, no better fate. So now I was anxious to obliterate, not only in exteriors, but substantially, intimately also, every trace of him that was left in me.

Here I was alone, more wholly alone than I could ever hope to be again on this earth; free from every present bond and obligation, a new man, my own master absolutely, with no past to drag along behind me, with a future that could be anything I might choose to make it. Oh for a pair of wings! How airy, how light I felt!

The attitude toward the world that past experiences had impressed upon me had no longer any basis in rea-

son. I could acquire a new sense of life, without regard to the unhappy trials of the late Mattia Pascal. It was for me to decide: I had the opportunity, with every prospect of success, to work out a new destiny in just such ample measure as Fortune seemed to be allowing me.

"One thing I'll be mighty careful of," I said to myself: "I'll make certain to preserve this freedom of mine above all else. I will seek out paths that are ever level and ever new, and never let my liberty become sodden with troubles. The moment life begins to look unpleasant anywhere, I'll look the other way, and move on. I'll concentrate on the things people ordinarily call inanimate, living in quiet attractive places, where there are beautiful views, perhaps. Little by little I'll get a new training, a new education, working hard and patiently to make my very self new, also. In the end I shall be able to boast not only of having lived two entirely different lives but of having been two entirely different people. . . ."

I began, for that matter, right where I was. A few hours before I left Alenga I went into a barber shop and had my beard trimmed close. I had first thought of getting a clean shave; but then I decided that such a radical step might arouse suspicion in such a little town.

The barber was a tailor also, by trade, and the effects of this second calling were evident in his aged form, almost bent double by his long sittings in one cramped position, leaning over his work with his glasses perched on the end of his nose. I concluded, in fact, that he was more tailor, probably, than barber. Armed with a pair of cutter's shears, with blades so long that he

had to hold them up at the end with his other hand, he fell, like the wrath of God, upon the whiskers of the late Mattia Pascal. I dared hardly draw a breath. I closed my eyes and kept them closed till, at last, I felt a tugging at my sleeve. The old man, streaming with perspiration, was holding a mirror up in front of me so that I might say whether he had performed the operation well.

This was asking too much, it seemed to me; and I parried:

"No, thank you! Never mind! I'm afraid the shock would break it!"

"Break what?"

"The mirror! A pretty thing it is, too! Antique, I imagine!"

It was a small round glass with a heavy handle of carved ivory—who knows from what boudoir of the aristocracy? And through what devious history, had it ever gotten into that out-of-the-way shop of a rural barber-tailor? However, in order not to hurt the old artisan's feelings—he stood there unable to grasp what I was talking about—I put the thing in front of my face.

The destruction already wrought on my cheeks, jaws and chin gave me warning in advance as to the kind of monster that would eventually come forth from the thicket behind which the late Mattia Pascal had skulked through his unhappy life. I had another good reason, besides, for detesting the fellow cordially. A tiny projection of a chin, pointed and receding! And he had kept the matter quiet for so long! Henceforth—and it seemed downright treason to me—I should have to carry

that chin around in the full light of day! And my dot of a nose, above! And that everlasting cock-eye!

"This eye," I reflected, "straying away off here to one side, will always be something belonging to *him*, in the new face I am going to have. The best I can ever do will be to wear a pair of colored spectacles, which ought to help—help a great deal, indeed, to make me look reasonably attractive. I'll let my hair grow long; and what with this truly imposing brow I have already and the smooth chin and the glasses I am going to have, I'll look more or less like a German philosopher; especially when I fill out the picture with a long straight coat and a soft broad-brimmed hat!"

There was no way out of it: starting with the raw materials actually available, a philosopher I had to be! "But, anyhow, we'll do the best we can!" I would work out some philosophy or other—a cheerful one, you may be sure—to serve me in my passage through the humanity about me—a humanity, which, try as I would, I could regard only as a very ridiculous, a very small and petty affair!

A name was at last provided—handed to me, one might say—on the train, a few hours north of Alenga on the line toward Turin.

There were two gentlemen in my compartment, engaged in an animated discussion on early Christian ikonography, a branch of learning in which, to an ignoramus like me, they both seemed very well versed indeed. The younger of the two men—a slight pale-faced fellow with a curly black beard—seemed to take a malicious satisfaction in supporting (on the authority of Justin the Martyr, Tertullian, and I forget who else) an ancient tradition to the effect that Christ had a very

ugly face. He delivered this opinion in a heavy cavernous voice that contrasted strangely with his pale ascetic slenderness.

"Yes, sir, just that, just that: ugly, no more, no less! And Kirillos of Alexandria, you know, goes farther still—yes sir! Kirillos of Alexandria says, word for word, that Christ was the ugliest of all living men!"

His companion, a placid tranquil old scholar, not over-attentive to his person, but with a smile of subtle irony drawing down the corners of his mouth (his head toppling forward on a long neck as he sat there erect) was inclined to think that little reliance could be placed on such primitive traditions:

"In those early days," said he, "the Church was all taken up with the teachings and the spiritual aspects of its Founder. Little, or even, as one may say, no attention at all, was paid to his corporeal features."

At a certain point the conversation turned to Saint Veronica and two statues in the ancient city of Panea which by some were held to be images of the Christ with the lady of the miracle before him.

"Nothing of the kind," the younger man declared. "I didn't know there was any doubt about it either: those two statues represent the Emperor Adriano (Hadrian) with the city kneeling in submission at his feet."

The old scholar placidly stuck to his opinion, which must have been a contrary one; for his colleague, turning now toward me, insisted obstinately:

"Adriano!"

"*Beronike* in Greek—and from *Beronike* we get *Veronica*. . . ."

"Adriano!" (still to me).

"So you see: *Veronica, vera icon*—a very natural distortion. . . ."

"Adriano!" (again to me).

". . . for the *Beronike* mentioned in the 'Acts of Pilate' . . ."

"Adriano!"

And he said "Adriano" over and over again, looking at me as though he expected my support in the matter.

The train came into a station and they got out, still arguing heatedly. I went to the window and leaned forward, to watch them. They had taken a few steps when the old man lost his temper and stalked off by himself in another direction.

"Who's your authority? Who's your authority?" the younger fellow called after him defiantly. The old man turned and shouted back:

"Camillo de Meis!"

I got the impression that he too meant his answer for me. I had been mechanically repeating the "Adriano" which the other man had so drilled into my ears. I simply threw the *de* away and kept the "Meis."

"Adriano Meis! Yes, that will do. Sounds quite distinguished and unusual: Adriano Meis!"

And I thought besides that the name went well with the smooth face, the colored glasses, the straight coat, and broad-brimmed hat I was eventually to wear.

"Adriano Meis! Fine! Those squabbling Christians have baptized me!"

Deliberately suppressing in myself all thoughts of my life just past, and concentrating on the purpose of beginning a new existence from that moment, my whole being seemed to expand with a fresh childlike glee. It was as though I had been born again, guileless, lim-

pid, pure, transparent, my senses and my consciousness awake and watchful to take advantage of everything that might contribute to the upbuilding of my new personality. My soul meanwhile soared aloft in the joy of this new freedom. Never had people and things looked to me as they did now. The air between us seemed suddenly to have lost its cloudiness. How approachable human beings now appeared! How easy and unstrained the relations I would henceforth establish with them—all the more since I would have very little to ask of men to satisfy the requirements of the placid felicity that would be mine! What a delicious sense of spiritual lightness! What a gentle, what a serenely ineffable intoxication! Fortune, quite beyond all my hopes and expectations, had swept off the complicated coils that had been strangling me; and drawing me aside from ordinary life, made me an impartial spectator of the struggle for existence in which others were still entangled: "Just wait," a voice whispered in my ear, "and you'll see how amusing it all is when you view it from a point of vantage on the outside. That fellow, for instance! Here he was souring his own stomach, goading a poor old man to rage, for the mere sake of proving that our good Lord was the ugliest of all living men!"

I smiled fatuously. And I began to smile that way, at everything: at the lines of trees that wheeled past me as my express rushed along; at the farmhouses scattered over the countryside, where I could imagine peasants puffing and blowing at the chill fog that might come some night to scar the olive trees; or shaking their fists at the sky which refused and refused to send them rain; at the birds escaping in terror to right and left

as the locomotive came thundering up; at the telegraph poles flitting by the car-windows—hot with "news," doubtless (like that of my suicide in the mill-flume at Miragno!); at the poor wives of the flagmen, who stood at the crossings waving their red warning signals—the regulation caps of their husbands on their heads.

Until at last my eye chanced to fall upon the plain gold ring which encircled the third finger of my left hand.

I came to myself with a violent start. I winced. I closed my eyes. Then I clapped my right hand down over my left and tried to work the ring loose, stealthily, without attracting my own attention, as it were! The ring came off. I could not help remembering that around the inside of it two names were engraved: "Mattia—Romilda," with a date.

What should I do with it? . . .

I opened my eyes; and for a time I sat there frowning at the ring as it lay in the palm of my hand.

Everything around me had lost its charm. Here still was one last link in the chain that held me to my past! What a tiny bit of metal, in itself! So light, and yet so heavy!

But the chain was broken, broken, thank God! Why so mawkish then over this, the last of its fragments?

I started to throw the ring out of the window, but then I thought: "So far Fortune has been with me—exceptionally, miraculously, with me. I must not abuse her good nature, now." I had come to a point where I believed everything possible—even this: that a small ring tossed off a train on a rarely frequented railroad track might be found by some one, a laborer, say; and passing from hand to hand, come to reveal in the end

—by virtue of the two names inscribed upon it—the truth: the truth, that is, that the victim of the mill-flume tragedy at Miragno was not the librarian of Santa Maria Liberale—was not the late Mattia Pascal.

"No, no," I murmured to myself, "No, I must wait for a surer place—but where?"

The train stopped at another station. A workman was standing on the platform with a box of tools. I bought a file from him. When the train started again, I cut the ring into small bits and scattered them out of the window.

Less to control the direction of my thoughts, than to give a certain substantiality to my new life hitherto floating impalpable in void, I began to think of Adriano Meis, to create a past for him, giving him a father and a birth-place, setting about this problem, also, in a leisurely, methodical manner, trying to establish each detail vividly and definitely in my own mind.

I would be an only son: that point seemed certain beyond dispute.

"I doubt if there was ever a more only son than I . . . and yet, when you think of it . . . how many people like me must there be in the world—my brothers, therefore, in a way! Your hat, your coat, a letter, on the railing of a bridge . . . deep water underneath . . . but instead of jumping in, you take a steamer . . . to America, or elsewhere. A week later, they find a corpse . . . too far gone to identify. It's the man off the bridge, of course—and no one thinks of the matter twice. To be sure, I didn't arrange this business myself—no letter, no coat, no hat, no bridge. . . . But otherwise my situation is the same—in fact, there's one thing to my advantage in it—I can enjoy my freedom without

any remorse whatever. They forced it on me, they did. . . .

"So then, an only son . . . born . . . wonder if I had better say where? Well, how can you avoid it? A fellow doesn't come down from the clouds—the moon, for instance, as midwife! Though I remember reading in a book in the Library that the ancients used the moon in some such way—prospective mothers praying to her under the name of Lucina. . . .

"However, I was not born in heaven! How keep off the earth?

"Stupid! Of course! At sea! You were born at sea! On a steamer! My parents were traveling at the time. . . . Traveling, with a baby about to come? Hardly plausible! How get them to sea? They were emigrants . . . had to come home from America! Why not? Everybody goes to America. Even the late Mattia Pascal, poor devil, started for there in his time. So my father earned these eighty thousand lire in America? Nonsense! If he had had that much money, his wife would have been comfortably fixed in a hospital. They would have waited for me to come, before starting on their journey. Besides, you don't get rich so easily in America any more. . . . My father . . . by the way, what was his name? . . . Paolo! yes, Paolo Meis! My father, Paolo Meis, had a hard time over there . . . as so many do. Three or four years of bad luck . . . then, discouraged—humble pie!—A letter to his old man . . . my grandfather, that is . . ."

I insisted on having a grandfather. . . . "He lived long enough for me to know him well—a nice old man . . . like that professor who got off the train some sta-

tions back—professor of Christian ikonography, I think he was. . . ."

Strange how the mind works! Why was it I came so naturally to think of my father, Paolo Meis, as a no-account . . . who . . . of course, how else? . . . had been the torment of my grandfather, marrying against the latter's will and eloping to America?

"I suppose he too believed that Jesus was the ugliest of living men! And he must have got his full deserts off there in South America, if, with his wife in a precarious condition, he bought the tickets, the moment my grandfather's money came, and sailed for home again. . . .

"Need I have been born at sea, necessarily, though? Why not in South America, simply—in Argentina . . . a few months before my father returned? Yes, much better that way, in fact. Because grandpa was tickled when he heard about me—forgave his scapegrace son just on my account! So I crossed the Atlantic; while still a tiny baby! Third class, probably! And I caught the croup on the way over, and almost died. That at least is what grandpa always told me. . . .

"Now some people would say I might be sorry I didn't die on that occasion, when I was too small to notice much. . . . I am not of that opinion! What troubles, what trials, after all, have I been through in my life-time? Only one, to tell the truth: that was when my grandfather died—I had grown up with him, you see. For my father, Paolo Meis, scalawag that he was—never able to stick to any one thing—went back to South America again—after a few months—leaving his wife with my grandfather. Paolo Meis died over there—yellow fever. By the time I was three, I lost my

mother too—so I never really knew them—only the few things I learned later on. . . . And that isn't the worst of it. I never found out exactly where I was born. Argentina . . . yes . . . but that's a big place . . . what town in Argentina? Grandpa didn't know . . . couldn't remember that father ever told him and he never thought to ask . . . I, of course, was too young to remember such things . . ."

In short: (*a*) an only son—of Paolo Meis, (*b*) born in South America, in the Argentine Republic, locality unknown; (*c*) brought to Italy when a few months old (croup); (*d*) no memory, and little information, about my parents; (*e*) reared and educated by my grandfather.

Where? Here, there, everywhere! First at Nice: rather vague recollections of Nice; *Piazza Massena;* the *Promenade des Anglais;* the *Avenue de la Gare;* . . . After that, Turin.

I was on my way to Turin, at present; and there, I would attend to many things: I would pick out a street and a house, where my grandfather boarded me till I was ten years old, in a family which I would settle just there, being sure it fitted the background well. There I would live, or rather relive, all the boyhood of Adriano Meis.

* * * * *

This pursuit, this game, of creating out of sheer fancy a life which I had never really lived, which I pieced together from details observed in people and in places here and there, and which I made my own and felt to be my own, amused me mightily in the first days of my wanderings—though the pleasure had ever an under-

current of sadness. I made it my daily work, however. I lived not only in the present but in a past, the past which Adriano Meis had not as yet lived.

I kept, I may say, very little of what I thought of originally. Nothing, I believe, is ever imagined, unless it have roots of greater or lesser depth in actual experience. On the other hand, the strangest things may be true when this latter is the case. The human mind could never dream of certain impossible situations that rush out to meet you from the tumultuous inwards of life as it is lived; though always, the living, breathing, palpitating reality is different—and how different!—from the inventions we erect upon it. How many things we need—and how unutterably minute they are, how entirely inconceivable! — to reconstitute that reality from which we derive our fictions! How many lines we must bring together again in the complicated skein of life—lines which we have cut to make our situation something individual, something standing by itself!

Now, what was I but a creature of the imagination? I was a walking fiction which was determined and, for that matter, obliged, to stand by itself though dependent on, immersed in, reality. Daily witnessing, daily observing in detail, the life that the world about me was living, I was conscious at once of its infinitude of inner concatenations and of the many bonds which I had severed between me and it. Could I reunite all those broken connections with reality? Who knows where they would finally drag me? They might prove to be the reins of wild horses pulling the frail chariot of my necessary fictioning to destruction in the end. No! I should be careful to do nothing more than reintegrate the imaginary experience.

On the playgrounds, in the public gardens, about the streets, I would follow and study children from five to ten years old, noting their ways, their language, their games, in order gradually to construct an infancy for Adriano Meis. And I succeeded so well that eventually his childhood had a relatively substantial existence in my mind. I decided not to create a new mother for myself. That I should have regarded as profaning a beautiful and sacred memory. But a grandfather—that was different! With real gusto I set about fashioning one —the one I had thought of in my first outline.

How may real grand-daddies—little old men whom I picked out and followed about, now at Turin, now at Venice, now at Milan—went into the delightful ancestor of my own dreams. One would give me his ivory snuff-box; and his checker-board handkerchief with red and black squares; another would furnish his cane; a third his glasses and his long two-pointed beard; a fourth his amusing walk and the thunderous way he sneezed or blew his nose; a fifth his curious high-pitched voice and laugh. The grandparent I eventually produced, was a shrewd and canny old fellow, something of a grumpus, a wise connoisseur of the arts, a man contemptuous of modern things and therefore unwilling to send me to school, preferring to educate me by conversations with himself on long walks about the city to the museums and picture galleries. On my visits to Milan, Padua, and Venice, to Ravenna, Florence, and Perugia, I had this dear old man always at my side—talking to me more than once, however, through the mouths of professional guides!

At the same time, I was keen to live my own life in the present. Every now and then, the realization of my

limitless, my unheard-of freedom would sweep over me, filling me with such exquisite delight that I would be caught up into a sort of beatified ecstasy. I would take in one deep breath after another to feel my whole spirit expand with my lungs. Alone! Alone! Master of myself! Not an obligation to anyone, nor a responsibility for anyone! Where shall we go today? To Venice? To Venice we go! To Florence? Very well, to Florence, then! And inseparable from me was my exultant felicity!

I remember particularly, one evening at Turin, in the first weeks of my new life. The sun was setting. I was standing on the boulevard along the Po, near a mole thrown out into the foaming stream to shelter a fish pound. The air was marvellously clear, so clear that everything seemed gilded, enameled in the limpid brightness of the twilight. The sense of my freedom now came over me with such intenseness that I really thought I was losing my mind. I tore myself away, to put an end to my mad enjoyment.

I had long since attended to the remodeling of my exterior semblance. My beard was gone. I had selected a light blue tint for my spectacles. Letting my hair grow, I had succeeded in giving it a touch of artistic unruliness. With these modifications I was quite another person. Sometimes I would stop in front of a mirror and have a long conversation with myself, unable meantime to keep from laughing:

"Adriano Meis, you are a lucky dog on the whole! Pity I had to give you a makeup just like this—but after all, what does it matter? It gets by! It gets by! If it weren't for that cock-eye, which belongs to *him* really, you would not be half bad looking. In fact, there

is something actually impressive about your features: you have personality, as they say. It's true the women laugh at you a little; but that's not altogether your fault. If *he* hadn't cropped his hair quite so close, you wouldn't be obliged to wear it quite so long; and certainly it's from no choice of your own that you go around as sleekly jowled as a priest. Anyhow, cheer up! When the ladies laugh, just give a snicker or two yourself—and you'll survive it, you'll survive it! . . ."

For the rest, I lived almost exclusively by myself and for myself. If I exchanged a word occasionally with an inn-keeper, a waiter, a chamber-maid, a neighbor at table, it was never for the sake of conversation. My disinclination toward more intimate contacts showed me, furthermore, that I had an innate distaste for lying and deceit. Not that other people were so anxious to become better acquainted! On the contrary, my general appearance tended to keep them away—making me look like a foreigner, probably. I remember that on one of my visits to Venice, I proved unable to convince an old gondolier that I was not a German—an *Austriaco;* whereas I was actually born, in Argentina if you wish, but still of Italian parentage. What really made me an "outsider" was something quite different and known to me alone: in reality, I was nobody. No public registry bore a record of me, except the documents in Miragno —and according to them I was dead and buried, under my other name.

I did not mind all this so very much; and yet I could not reconcile myself to passing for an Austrian. Never before had I had occasion to center my mind on the notion of "country." In the old days there had been plenty of other things to worry about! But now, in

my leisure and solitude, I became accustomed to meditating on many things I should never before have regarded as of any possible interest to me. Indeed, I would often find myself following such trains of thought quite involuntarily, and be somewhat put out because they seemed to lead nowhere. Yet I had to do something to pass my time—once I had my fill of traveling and sight-seeing. To escape my own reflections, when these began to lie heavy on my mind, I would sometimes turn to writing, filling sheet after sheet of paper with my new signature, holding my pen in a new way with the idea of producing a new style of hand. But sooner or later I would tear my paper up and throw my pen aside. I might very well be illiterate, for all the writing I should have to do! To whom would I ever be called upon to write? Henceforth I could and would receive no letters from anybody.

This particular thought, like many others, unfailingly plunged me into my past again. My home, the Library, the streets of Miragno, the sea-shore, would come into my mind. "Wonder if Romilda is still wearing black? I suppose so—just for appearances. What can she be doing now?" And I would think of her as I had seen her, in those days, about the house; and of the widow Pescatore, as well—cursing my memory every time she thought of me, I could be sure.

"I'll bet neither one of them has paid a single visit to that poor man there in the cemetery—a terrible end he came to, at that! Where do you suppose they put my grave? Probably Aunt Scolastica refused to lay out as much money on my funeral as she did for mamma's; and of course, Berto wouldn't do anything. I can just hear him: 'Who obliged Mattia to go and do

that? I didn't! He had two lire a day from his job at the library! How much did he need to get along?' No, they turned the dirt up and buried me like a dog! In one of the town lots, too, I'll bet my hat! Well, what of it? What do I care? Just the same, I am sorry for that poor man. Ten to one he had a few people who were fond of him and would have treated him to a better send off! And yet, little he need worry now? He's over with his troubles!''

I continued traveling about for some time, going beyond the confines of Italy, down the Rhine, for instance, as far as Cologne, following the river on an excursion steamer: Mannheim, Worms, Mainz, Bingen, Coblenz. I had thought of keeping on up into Scandinavia; but then I considered that I would have to put some limits to my expenditures. My money had to last me for the rest of my days; and you couldn't call it very much for such a purpose: I could bank on living thirty years more at least. Outside the law in the sense that I could produce no document to prove, let alone my identity, the fact that I was even alive, I could not possibly find any lucrative employment. To keep out of trouble, therefore, I should have to restrict my outlay to the bare comforts. Taking account of stock, I saw that I must not exceed two hundred lire a month. Not rank luxury, by any means! And yet, back home the three of us had gotten along on half of that! Yes, I could manage!

But, away down underneath, I was getting tired of this going about from place to place, in silence and alone. I was beginning, despite myself, to feel the need for some companionship—as I discovered one gloomy eve-

ning in Milan shortly after returning from my trip to Germany.

It was a cold day, cloudy, and threatening rain. I happened to notice an old man huddled up against a lamp-post. He was selling matches, and the box, hanging from his neck by a strap, prevented him from drawing his ragged overcoat warmly enough about him. He was blowing on the back of his hands and I observed that a string ran from one of his fists down between his legs. On looking closer, I saw it was the leash for a mere speck of a puppy, three or four days old at the most, lying there between the old beggar's worn-out shoes, shivering with cold, and whining piteously.

"Want to sell that pup?" I asked.

"Yes," the man answered, "and for very little, though he's worth a lot of money! A fine dog, he's going to make some day, this little brute! You can have him for twenty-five!"

The poor puppy continued whimpering, though that estimate of his worth might have set him up considerably—I suppose he understood, however, that in mentioning such a figure, his master was appraising not the future merits of the dog but the stupidity he thought he could read on my face. But I, meantime, was thinking hard. If I bought the puppy, I could be sure of having a faithful friend eventually, one who would tell no tales, and who would never ask, as the price of his confidence and affection, who I was, where I came from nor whether my papers were in order. On the other hand, I would have to take out a license for him and pay a tax—things obviously a dead man could not, or at least, should not, do. A first deliberate aggression,

a first gratuitous restriction, however slight, upon my freedom!

"Twenty-five? What do you take me for?" I snapped at the old man.

I crammed my hat down over my eyes, turned up the collar of my coat, and hurried away. It was beginning to rain in a fine mist-like drizzle. "A great thing, this liberty of mine," I muttered as I walked along; "but a bit of a tyrant, too, if it denies me the privilege even of buying a poor puppy out of its misery!"

IX

Cloudy Weather

WHETHER that first winter was a hard one or a mild one I am sure I do not know: I was too much absorbed in the excitement of traveling and in gloating over my new-found freedom. But this second one, frankly, was getting on my nerves. I was tired, I suppose, from being on the move so much, with the additional concern of keeping within a definite allowance. So that now if it was cold and damp, I knew that it was cold and damp; and, despite my struggles to keep my spirits free from the influence of the weather, a cloudy day would not fail to depress me.

"But it's going to clear up, it's going to clear up!" I would assure myself. "Fortune is on your side—and the freedom you owe to her will not be long disturbed!"

To tell the truth I had seen enough of carefree idleness. Adriano Meis had had his youthful fling; now it was time for him to grow up, become a man, take hold of himself, find an even tenor of modest sensible living. Not so much of a problem, either, for a person entirely free, without a responsibility in the world!

So, at least, I thought; and I applied myself seriously to the question of selecting a town to fix my residence in—I could not go on hopping from one place to another, like a bird without a nest, if I ever intended

really to settle down. Well where, then? A big metropolis, or some small center?

I could not make up my mind. I would shut my eyes and mentally review all the cities that I had visited, lingering in this square, on that street, among those scenes, which I could remember with greatest vividness and pleasure. And in each case, I would say:

"Yes, I was there once. And how much of life I am missing—life that lives its tense nervous course, here, there, in all its variety? How many times have I felt: 'Yes, I should like to spend the rest of my days, right here?' And how I have envied the people who did live in such places, with their habits and occupations adapted to those beautiful surroundings, free from the sense of transiency which always keeps the traveler ill at ease!"

This restlessness, this painful feeling of detachment, was my besetting torment, something that would never allow me really to be at home among the objects about me, or even to think of the bed on which I slept as really mine. Things, I believe, have value to us only in proportion as they have power for evoking and grouping familiar images about them. Certainly an object may sometimes be pleasing to us in itself, through its artistic lines, let us say; but more often our delight in it comes from wholly extraneous considerations. Our fancy beautifies it with a halo, as it were, of fond remembrances, whereby we see it, not at all as it really is, but as something alive, as something animated by the images we habitually associate with it. What we love is that portion of ourselves which we recognize in it, which establishes a harmony between it and us, giv-

ing it a soul that is known only to us because that soul is the creation of our own memories.

Needless to say, I could never thus transform the atmosphere of the various hotel rooms in which I passed my nights. But a house, a home, a place that was really, wholly mine, could I hope ever to have one?

I had very little money to begin with. So make it a wee little house, just two or three rooms—but comfortable! Ought to be possible!—But, wait, not quite so fast! A number of things have to be thought of—very carefully weighed, indeed. Free, free as the wind that blows! Yes—but on one condition: your valise in your hand—today here, tomorrow there! You buy a house—settle down—and right away: deeds, public records, tax bills.—Your name in the directory? And on the voting lists? Of course! Well then—what name? An assumed name? And after that, what? 'Who is that fellow?' 'Where did he come from?' Secret investigations by the police! Trouble, in a word, annoyances—one thing leading to another! Out of the question then, a house, property of my own! Oh well—a furnished room, board in a private family! Why so wrought up over nothing?

It was winter—beastly weather—that set me thinking along such lines, the approach of the Christmas season, that always makes one long for a cozy corner by a hearth with the intimacy and warmth of a home about one.

Not that I missed the good cheer of my own family circle! The only home I ever thought of with any real regret was the one I had had before that, the old home of my father and mother—destroyed long since, and not by anything connected with my recent change of status. I could console myself with the reflection

that I would probably be no happier over the holidays, were I to spend them back in Miragno with my wife and—horrors!—my mother-in-law.

I treated myself to the pleasure of an imaginary return to them—a big loaf of nut bread under my arm:

"A knock on the door:

" 'Excuse me—do they live here still—Romilda Pescatore, widow Pascal, and Marianna Dondi, widow Pescatore?'

" 'Yes, and who is calling, may I ask?'

" 'Why, I am the late husband of Signora Pascal—you know, that fellow they found drowned in the Flume, a year or more ago. Thought I'd just drop in for a visit over the holidays—on leave from the other world, with permission, of course, from Higher Up. I'll be going back soon, however!'

"Do you suppose the old woman would drop dead on seeing me walk in, like that? She drop dead? I should smile! I'd be the dead one—give her two days!"

No, the one real blessing, the one thing in my adventure that I could really be thankful for, was, I had to admit, my escape from my wife, from my mother-in-law, from my debts, from the humiliating afflictions of my former life. These, indeed, I had shaken off for good. Well then, what more could I ask for? And just consider: I had a whole, whole life before me! For the moment, to be sure—well, but there were plenty of people as lonely as I was! . . .

"Yes, but such people"—you see it was cloudy weather, and my spirits were low—"such people either are travelers abroad and have homes to go back to; or, if they haven't, they can have if they choose (meantime going to see their friends). Whereas I—I will always

be like this, a stranger wherever I am—that's the difference. A stranger, a visitor forever in this life, Adriano Meis will be!"

Then I would get angry at myself and storm:

"Why this whimpering? Come, not so much fussing over little things. You have friends—or at least, you can have!"

Friends?

In the *trattoria* where I was taking my meals in those days, a man who sat at a table near by had shown himself disposed to make my acquaintance. He must have been something over forty—dark hair, what there was of it, gold eyeglasses that didn't like to stay put, perhaps because their chain (gold also) was so heavy. An amusing little chap, really! Just imagine: when he stood up and put on his hat, he looked like some boy dressed up as an old man. The trouble was with his legs, so short that when he sat down they didn't reach the floor. He never, you might say, rose from a chair—it was a case rather of slipping off it. He tried to mitigate this drawback by wearing high heels. Well, what of that? They did make a good deal of noise, those heels; but they gave a certain snap to his way of walking, quick little steps that made me think of a partridge running.

A solid person, besides, of some ability! A little testy, perhaps, and better as a talker than as a listener; but with original views on things, always his own point of view. . . . And he had a decoration.

He handed me his card one day: "*Cavaliere* Tito Lenzi."

I must say that this episode of the visiting card gave me quite a shock; for I imagined I must have cut a poor

figure in not being able to return the courtesy. I had not as yet had any cards made—a certain self-consciousness I suppose, about putting my new name into print deliberately. All nonsense, anyhow, such trifles! Why a visiting-card, pray? Say your name right out, and have done with it!

And so I did; but, as for telling the truth, my real name . . . well, you understand.

What a good talker Cavaliere Tito Lenzi was! He even knew Latin and he could quote Cicero like anything.

"One's happiness comes from within? That's not the whole story, my dear sir. Your own inner self is not sufficient as a guide. It might be if our spirit were a private castle and not, so to speak, a public square—if, that is, we could think of our Self as something quite apart from everything else, and if that Self were not, by its very nature, visible, perceptible to everybody. In the mind, as I think, there is, to put it differently, an essential relation—essential, notice—between me who do the thinking and the other beings whom I apprehend. Well then, I cannot be sufficient unto myself—do you follow me? So long as the feelings, the inclinations, the tastes of these people whom I have thus made a part of myself and you a part of yourself do not affect me and you, neither you nor I can be contented, happy, easy in our own minds; and so true is this that we work as hard as we can so that our own feelings, thoughts, interests, inclinations, may find some response in other people. And if we fail in this because—well, how shall we say?—because the atmosphere of the moment is not right for bringing the seed to fruition, the seed, my dear sir, of your ideas that you have planted in the minds

of others, you cannot say that you are satisfied with your own inner life. How can you be? What's it really amount to? Well yes, you can live all alone in the world—rot away in the sterile darkness around you. But is that enough? Listen, my dear sir, I hate fine phrases. To my mind they are so much pap to feed people unable to think for themselves. And here is one of them: 'I am content if I am true unto myself!' Cicero said something like that: '*Mea mihi conscientia pluris est quam hominum sermo.* But Cicero —let us be quite frank—Cicero was a great one for big words with little meaning. The Lord deliver us from such! Worse than a beginner on the violin . . . !''

I could have hugged this delightful little old man, who could talk so charmingly; except that he did not always confine himself to the acute and often witty disquisitions of which I have given you a sample. He began to be more personal in his remarks; and just as I was thinking that our friendship was well and easily under way, I had occasion to feel some embarrassment and an obligation to hold off at a safe distance. So long as he did the talking and the conversation dealt with general subjects, everything went smoothly; but finally Cavaliere Lenzi wanted to hear from me.

''You are not from Milan, I gather.''

''No.''

''Just passing through?''

''Yes.''

''Interesting town, Milan!''

''Very!''

I must have sounded like a trained parrot. And the more he pressed me with his questions, the farther afield my answers took us. Before long I had landed in

America. But the moment the Cavaliere learned that I was born in Argentina, he leapt from his chair and came over to shake my hand:

"Ah, Argentina! My heartiest congratulations, my dear sir! I envy you! America! America! . . . I have been there myself."

"Time for me to be getting out of here," I reflected uneasily. And then aloud:

"You have been there? Perhaps I ought to congratulate you, rather; because, though I was born in Argentina, I can hardly say I was ever there. I was a few weeks old when they brought me away—so that my feet, you may say, never trod American soil!"

"What a pity," exclaimed Cavaliere Lenzi sympathetically. "But I suppose you have relatives in those parts still?"

"None that I know of!"

"Oh, I see, your family came back to Italy for good. Where did you settle?"

I shrugged my shoulders:

"Why—we lived in various places—a short time here, a short time there, moving about a good deal. I have nobody left, at present. I see a good deal of the world!"

"How delightful! Lucky man, I must say. You just travel around? And nobody to look out for!"

"No one!"

"How delightful! Lucky man! I envy you!"

"I suppose you have a family?" I decided to ask, to veer the conversation back upon him.

"Unfortunately, no!" he sighed, knitting his brow. "I'm quite alone, as I have always been."

"Your case then, is the same as mine!"

"And I can't say that I like it, my dear sir," he

exclaimed. "I find life very dull. For me, all this loneliness . . . well, in short, I'm tired of it. Oh, I have crowds of friends, of course; but, believe me, when you get to a certain age, you don't like to go home, every day, to a house where you know you will find no one waiting for you. Well, after all—there are people who understand the game and there are people who don't, my dear sir; and those who do come out worse, in the end, than the others. Saps your energy, your initiative, you see. It's this way: when you're really wise, you say: 'I mustn't do this,' or 'I mustn't do that—otherwise . . . I'll be putting my foot in it.' Very well, you discover, sooner or later, that life itself means putting one foot in after another; and the man who never made a fool of himself is the man who never really lived; and there you are!"

"But you," I encouraged comfortingly, "you have time still."

"To make a mistake? Huh, my dear sir, as though I hadn't made many of them!" And he smiled mischievously. "You see, I've travelled, travelled a great deal, as you have, and as for adventures—well, lots of them and some most amusing. Listen, for example! At Vienna, one evening . . ."

And I was dumbfounded! Love affairs, that little old man? Three, four, five, Austria, France, Russia, even Russia? And such affairs—one more spicy than the other, as he retailed them to me. It was sufficient to look at his absurd, his utterly insignificant person to know that he was lying; and at first I was mortified, ashamed, for him: surely he could not realize the effect that all his boastings really had on those who heard them. But then I got angry: here was this little fellow

lying to me with the greatest zest and ease, and quite gratuitously, without needing to do so in the least; while I, who could not dispense with falsehood, who was, in fact, a living lie, felt my soul tortured every time I had to deceive someone.

But later I thought it over: if this agreeable little fellow took such pleasure in feeding me all this talk about imaginary love affairs, it was precisely because there was no reason for him to lie: he had almost a right to amuse himself in that way if he chose. Whereas with me it was a matter of constraint, an irksome, humiliating, debasing obligation. And what conclusion must I draw from the situation? Only one, alas: that I would be condemned to falsehood eternally; that, therefore, I could never have a friend, a true friend; for friendship presupposes confidence; and how could I ever entrust to anyone the secret of this second life of mine; a nameless life without a past, a fungus sprouting from the presumptive suicide of the late Mattia Pascal? No, the best I could hope for would be casual, superficial relationships with my fellow humans, short exchanges of indifferent words on subjects that did not matter.

Well, again what of it? Little inconveniences incident to good fortune! Should I lose heart on account of them? By no means! I should go on living, as I had lived, by and for myself! Not a fascinating prospect, altogether, to be sure! My own company, good as it was, would still improve from a little variety!

Sometimes, passing my hands over my face and finding it beardless, or running them through my hair and finding it so long, or adjusting those strange blue glasses to my little nose, I would experience a curious bewilder-

ment, as though it were not myself whom I was touching, as though I were no longer the man I always had been. Facing issues squarely, the truth was that all this new makeup was for other people, not for myself. Well then, why wear the mask in my own presence? And if all I had invented and imagined in connection with Adriano Meis was not for the benefit of other people, for whose benefit was it? For mine? But I could take it seriously, if at all, only providing others should take it seriously. Accordingly, if this Adriano Meis lacked the courage to lie, avoided people because he lacked that courage, went off by himself into hiding in his hotel (when, during those cloudy wintry days, he could no longer bear to see himself so much alone, on the streets of Milan) just to pass the time in company with the late Mattia Pascal—it was easy to see that things would go worse and worse with me, that a gloomy outlook lay ahead, that my great good fortune—well. . . .

But I suppose the situation was really this: I was so absolutely free that it was difficult for me to bring myself to any particular kind of life. I would be on the point of making a decision, only to feel myself embarrassed, hampered, blocked by the many obstacles and uncertainties I would seem to perceive before me. So out I would go again upon the streets, watching everything, observing everything, pondering deeply on the least details; then, when I was tired, I would go into a café, look over the newspapers, and sit studying the people who went in and out—going out myself, in the end. Surely life, taken in this way, from the point of view, that is, of a spectator wholly disinterested in it, was something meaningless, purposeless, without rhyme or reason. I felt lost in that swirling throng of human

beings. The noise and the ferment of the city deafened me, drove me to distraction.

"Why, oh why," I would ask myself frantically, "why do men strive to make the mechanism of life so more and more complicated? Why all these banging, crashing machines? What will become of people when machines do everything for them? Will they then see that this so-called progress has nothing to do with happiness? From all these inventions with which science sincerely believes it is enriching humanity (really making us poorer because they cost so much) what satisfaction do we really get—even if we do admire them?"

In a street-car, the day before, I had met one of those individuals who cannot help telling their neighbors everything that comes into their heads; and he said to me:

"What a wonderful thing, these electric cars; for two cents I can go from one end of Milan to the other, and almost in as many minutes."

All the poor man could see was the long ride he got for his two cents—oblivious to the fact that it was more than he could do to earn a living in that world of noise and uproar, for all its electric cars, electric lights, and electric everything.

And yet science seems to make life easier and more convenient. Granted that it really does, I can still ask: "What worse service can you do a human being than reduce a life that is stupid and not worth while to the perfection of mechanical ease?"

And I would be back in my hotel again.

In the window casing in one of the corridors a bird-cage was hanging with a canary in it. Since I could not talk with people and had nothing else to do, I began

a conversation with the bird. He brightened up when I imitated a few notes of his, and seemed really to understand that someone was talking to him—catching who knows what references to nests, and green leaves and freedom, in the sounds I made with my lips. He would hop about in the cage, turn around, stand on one leg, look at me crosswise, lower and raise his head, finally chirp an answer, or a question, and then listen again. Poor little bird! He understood me, though I did not know what I was saying to him.

Well, isn't that what happens to men, more or less? Don't we imagine that Nature talks to us? Don't we think we catch some meaning in her mysterious whispering—an answer, which we interpret in accord with our yearnings to the many earnest questions we put to her? And Nature, meantime, in her infinite grandeur, has not the remotest consciousness even that we exist.

Which illustrates the consequences the most idle diversion may have for a man condemned to his own society exclusively. I felt like boxing my own ears: was I so far gone as to be turning really into a philosopher? No, no, there was no logic in the kind of life I was trying to lead; and I could not stand it much longer! I would have to overcome my reticences, make a decision, whatever the cost! My problem, after all, was to live, to live, to live!

X

A Font and an Ash-tray

A FEW days later I was in Rome, to find a permanent abode there.

Why Rome and not some other city? There was a reason, as I see now; but I must not go into it. The discussion would break up my story with reflections which, I believe, would be quite irrelevant just here. At the moment I selected Rome, because I liked it better than any other place of my acquaintance; and because, with all the visitors who are constantly coming and going there, it seemed the environment most likely to harbor a stranger like me without asking too many questions.

To find a suitable room on a quiet street with a reliable family was not so simple a matter. I finally chose one on the *Via Ripetta*, with a view over the river. The first impression I had of the people who were to house me was not, I must confess, at all favorable; so little so, in fact, that on returning to my hotel, I debated for some time as to whether it would not be advisable to hunt farther still.

Over the door, on the fifth floor, were two nameplates: *Paleari*, to the left, *Papiano*, to the right. Under the latter was a visiting card fastened to the wall with two thumb-tacks: *Silvia Caporale*.

When I knocked, an old man of at least sixty (Paleari? Papiano?) came to the door. He had, literally, nothing on but his underdrawers and a pair of worn-out slippers; so that I could not fail to observe the ruddy smoothness of the skin on his naked torso. His hands were covered with soap suds, of which also there was a veritable turban on his head.

"Oh, excuse me," he apologized; "I thought it was the servant. . . . Beg your pardon . . . hardly presentable, as you see. . . . Adriana! Terenzio! Well, hurry, won't you? A gentleman here! Just a moment, if you don't mind, sir. Won't you come in? . . . What can we do for you?"

"You were advertising a furnished room, if I am not mistaken . . ."

"Why yes, my daughter will be here in just a moment. . . . Adriana, Adriana! The room!"

A young lady, blushing, confused, embarrassed, came hurrying in, a short frail little thing, with light hair, pale cheeks and two soft blue eyes, filled with the same sadness which her whole face suggested. "Adriana!" I commented mentally. "My name! What a coincidence!"

"And where is Terenzio?" asked the old man of the shampoo.

"Why, you know very well, papa! He went to Naples yesterday! But, papa, go into the other room, please! If you could see yourself! . . . The idea!"

There was a note of tenderness in the girl's scolding that showed the gentleness of her disposition despite her mortification at the moment.

"Oh yes, I remember, I remember," said the old man; and he started away, dragging his mules along after

him noisily, and resuming the massage of his bald head and now his gray beard also before he reached the door.

I could not repress a smile, but I softened it in order not to increase the confusion of the little young lady, who, for her part, looked the other way, to conceal her chagrin. I had taken her for a mere girl at first; but now on closer inspection I observed that she was a grown woman—why else, in fact, would she be wearing that absurd wrapper far too large for her tiny form? She was in half mourning, also, as I noticed.

Speaking in a very low voice and continuing to withhold her eyes from me (who knows the impression I must have given her?), she led me along a dark hallway to the room that was for rent. As the door swung open, my lungs expanded to the flood of light and air that came streaming in through two large windows. We were on the river side of the building. In the distance, lay Monte Mario, Ponte Margherita, all the modern Prati quarter as far as the Castel Sant' Angelo. Directly below us, the old Ripetta bridge and the new one in process of construction alongside it. Over here to the left, the Ponte Umberto and the old houses of Tordinona following the broad bend of the Tiber; and beyond, the green summit of the Janiculum, with the great fountain of San Pietro in Montorio and the equestrian statue of Garibaldi.

I could not resist these exterior attractions, and engaged the room at once. For that matter it was pleasingly furnished too, with neat hangings in blue and white.

"This little balcony next door belongs to us too," the girl in the big wrapper obligingly added; "at least

for the time being. They are going to tear it down some day, they say, because it infringes."

"It does what?"

"It infringes! I mean it overhangs the city's right of way. But it will be a long time before they get the River Drive along this far!"

I smiled at this very serious talk from such a tiny girl in such a big dress, and said:

"Will it?"

She was embarrassed at my mirth and at my inane remark, lowered her eyes and pressed her teeth to her lower lip. To relieve her, I said in a very businesslike way:

"No children in the house, I suppose?"

She shook her head without speaking, perhaps detecting in my question an ironical note I had not intended. Again I hastened to make amends:

"You let no other rooms than this?"

"This is our best one," she answered still looking at the floor; "I am sure that if you don't like this . . ."

"No, no, I wanted to know whether . . ."

"Yes, we do rent another," she interrupted, raising her eyes with a forced indifference, "on the other side of the house, facing the street. A young lady has been taking it for two years past. . . . She gives piano lessons . . . but not at home."

And her features hinted at a smile but a very faint and sad one.

"There are three of us: father, myself and my brother-in-law . . ."

"Paleari?"

"No, Paleari is my father's name. My brother-in-law is Terenzio Papiano; but he is soon going away with

his brother, who, for the moment, is staying with us too. My sister died . . . six months ago.''

To change the subject I asked her what rent I should have to pay. There was no difficulty on that point.

''The first week in advance?'' I asked.

''You decide that; or rather, if you would leave your name . . .''

With a nervous smile, I began rummaging through my coat pockets:

''I'm sorry . . . I don't seem to have a single card with me . . . but—I heard your father call you Adriana. . . . My name is Adriano, like yours. Perhaps you don't feel flattered . . . ?''

''Why shouldn't I?'' she asked, noticing my strange confusion and laughing this time like a real child.

I laughed too and added:

''Well then, if you don't object, you may call me Adriano Meis . . . that's my name. May I move in this afternoon, or would you like tomorrow better . . .''

''Just as you wish,'' said she; but I went away with the feeling that she would have been better satisfied if I never came back at all. I had committed the unpardonable breach of not holding her big grown-up wrapper in sufficient awe.

Before many days, however, it was perfectly apparent to me that the ugly costume was a matter of necessity with her, though she probably would have liked to dress somewhat better. The whole weight of the household rested on her shoulders, and things would have gone badly had it not been for her.

The old man, Anselmo Paleari, who had come to the door with a turban of soap-suds on the outside of his head, had brains of about the same consistency on the

inside. The day I entered the house to live, he came to my room, not so much, as he said, to apologize for his unconventional attire at the time of my first call, as for the pleasure of making the acquaintance of a man who must certainly be either a scholar or an artist.

"Am I wrong?"

"You are! Nothing of the artist about me; and very little of the scholar. . . . I do read a book once in a while . . ."

"And I see you have good ones," said he, examining the backs of the volumes which I had set in line on my writing table. "Well, some day I'll show you mine, eh? For I have some good books too. However . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders and stood there in a sort of abstraction, a blank expression on his face, evidently quite oblivious to everything, forgetting where he was and with whom he was talking. He muttered "however" a couple more times, drawing the corners of his mouth down after each; then he turned on his heel and went away without another word.

At the moment I was moderately surprised, to say the least, at his behaviour; but later on, when he invited me into his room and showed me his books, as he had promised, I came to understand not only the man's distraction but many other things about him. I noticed titles like this: "Death and the Hereafter"; "Man and His Bodies"; "The Seven Principles of Life"; "Karma"; "The Astral Plane"; "A Key to Theosophy."

For Mr. Anselmo Paleari was a convert to the theosophical school.

Office manager, formerly, in some department or other of the government, he had been put on the retired list

before his time; and this had been his ruin, not only from the financial point of view but because, now, with his whole day free, there was nothing to restrain his weakness for research in various branches of the occult. Half his pension, at least, must have gone into those books, of which he owned a small-sized library. Nor could theosophy have satisfied him entirely: traces of the blight of scepticism were also much in evidence on his book-shelves: publications and reviews on philosophy, ancient and modern; treatises on science; and a whole collection on psychic research, in which he was now making experiments.

In Signorina Silvia Caporale, the piano teacher, old Mr. Paleari had discovered unusual psychic aptitudes—not very well developed, to be sure, but promising much with time and proper exercise. In fact, he saw in this lady a future rival of the most celebrated mediums.

For my part, I must testify that never in all my life have I seen (in a coarse, ugly face, more like a mask of Mardi Gras than a human countenance) a pair of such sorrowful eyes as those of Miss Silvia Caporale. Staring, bulging, intensely black, they gave the impression of being fixed in her head with lead weights to open and close them, like a doll's. The lady was well over forty; and in addition to the attractions of maturity, she had a rather handsome mustache under a nose that was a small bright red ball.

I learned eventually that the poor woman drank, drank heavily, to forget her age, her repulsiveness, and a hopeless love. More than one evening she would come home, her hat on askew, her nose red as a carrot, her eyes half-closed and more sorrowful than ever—in a deplorable state, in short. She would throw herself

on her bed and then gradually discharge all the wine she had absorbed in the form of torrential tears. Whereupon the little lady of the wrapper would get up out of bed, go into the other room, and take care of the woman for a good part of the night. Sorry for the poor thing, you see, all alone like that in the world, with the bitterness and jealousy of unrequited love, likely to commit suicide at any time—as she had tried to do twice already. Diplomatically the little lady would extract from her invalid a promise to be good—never, never to do such a thing again; and, sure enough, you would see the piano-teacher appear next day in her best finery, tripping gaily, playfully about, with the winsome ways of a capricious débutante. Once in a while she would earn a day's pay by accompanying some nascent café star at a rehearsal—and the result would be a new debauch that evening, and some new article of finery the following morning. Never a penny for her rent, of course, nor for the very modest board served her in the family.

However, she could not be sent away. For one thing, how could Mr. Anselmo Paleari go on with his psychic researches without her? But there was still another reason. Two years before, Miss Caporale's mother had died, leaving furniture which, on being sold, netted some six thousand lire. Coming to live at the Paleari's, the piano teacher had entrusted this money to Terenzio Papiano for an investment which he had represented to her as a sure thing. The six thousand lire had not been heard from again.

When I got this story from Miss Caporale herself—she wept copiously as she told it—I was able to find some excuse for Signor Anselmo, whom I had secretly been

accusing of improper guardianship in bringing his daughter into contact with such a woman in selfish pursuit of his own folly in occultism.

It is true that little Adriana was such an instinctively sound and virtuous little miss that she was really in no danger. In fact she was on her own guard, resenting her father's mysterious practices, and all his talk about the evocation of spirits, with the Caporale woman.

For Adriana was a devout little person, as I had reason to perceive during my very first days in the house. Fastened to the wall over the stand at the head of my bed was a small holy-water font of blue glass. One night I lay smoking in bed trying to read myself to sleep with one of old Paleari's crazy volumes. Distractedly I knocked my ashes, and finally put the stub of my cigarette, into the blue glass receptacle.

The next day the font had disappeared; and on my stand I found an ash-tray. I thought I would ask Adriana if she was the one who had made the change. Flushing slightly she replied:

"Yes; I'm sorry, but I thought you needed the ash-tray rather!"

"Was there any holy water in the font?"

"There was. The church of San Rocco is just across the street!"

And she went away.

That diminutive mamma must have taken me for a holy man if she brought extra water for me when she went to get her own at the Church of San Rocco. I imagine she did not take that trouble for her father. And as for Miss Silvia Caporale, if she had a font at all, it would have been for "holy wine,"—*vin santo* rather!

* * * * *

Suspended in a strange void, as I felt myself to be, I would fall into long meditations on the slightest provocation. And this matter of the holy water font reminded me that since my early boyhood, I had been quite neglecting religious practices. Yes, I had not been to Church since the last time Pinzone had taken me there with Berto under orders from mamma. I never thought of asking myself what my beliefs really were; and the late Mattia Pascal had come to a violent death without holy ministrations.

Suddenly now I found myself in a very surprising situation. As far as all my former acquaintances could know, I had rid myself—for good or for evil, as the case might be—of the most troublesome and disturbing worry that a living man can have: the fear of death. Who knows how many people back in Miragno might be saying:

"Lucky fellow, after all. . . . He has solved the one great problem!"

Whereas I had not solved anything at all! Here were these books of Anselmo Paleari, and what did they have to say? They said that the dead, the really dead that is, found themselves in much the same fix that I was in —in the "shells," namely, of the *Kámaloka,* in which a certain Dr. Leadbeater, author of the "Astral Plane" (the astral plane is the first sphere of the invisible world) places suicides especially, representing them as moved by all the desires and impulses that living people have, without being ever able to satisfy them (stripped as they are of their carnal bodies, which, meantime, they do not know they have lost).

"If that's so," I thought, "I may very well have been drowned in the Flume at 'The Coops.' This notion I have of being alive may be just an illusion."

Certain kinds of insanity are, as is well known, contagious. Paleari's brand, though I rebelled against it for some time, at last attacked me. Not that I believed I was really dead—that would not have been so bad; for the worst thing about death is dying; after that, I doubt whether people are so anxious to come back to life. But the point is that all at once I realized that I should have to die again. And that was a very painful discovery. After my suicide back there in the mill-flume, I had naturally taken it for granted that I had only life in front of me. And here was this Paleari fellow reminding me of death every other minute!

He could talk of nothing else, curses on him! But he talked of it with so much enthusiasm, and every now and then he dropped such curious remarks, with such unusual figures of speech, that I was always changing my mind about going somewhere else to live in order to be free of him. Though Paleari's beliefs seemed to me a bit childish, they were optimistic, on the whole; and, once I had awakened to the fact that I should have to die in earnest some day, it was not unpleasant to hear the thing spoken of in just his way.

"Is it reasonable?" he asked me one afternoon after reading me a passage from a book by Finot—it was a sentimental and very gruesome treatise on death with speculations such as a gravedigger addicted to morphine might make, picturing how the worms grow from the decomposition of human bodies. "Is it reasonable? Matter, I grant you, matter! Let us admit that it's all matter! But there are forms and forms of matter, kinds and kinds of matter, ways and ways of its manifesting itself. Here it is a stone; but there it is imponderable, impalpable ether, if you please. Take this

body of mine: finger-nails, teeth, hair—and notice—this delicate, delicate tissue of my eye. All matter! Well—who can deny it?—the substance which we call soul may very well be matter—but not, for heaven's sake, matter like my finger nails, or my teeth, or my hair; but matter, rather, like ether—understand! And you people, you admit that there is ether, but not that there is soul! I ask you: is it reasonable? Matter—all well and good! Follow my argument now and see where I come out—granting everything to the other side. Here is Nature! Now we think of man as the heir of a limitless series of generations—do we not? —as the product of a slow natural creation. Oh, I know: you, my dear Mr. Meis, you think man's a brute beast anyhow, and a cruel, stupid beast, one of the least respectable of all the animals. Well—I grant you even that, if you wish. Let us say that man represents a very low grade indeed in the scale of living beings. Here you have a worm; and here a man. How many grades shall we put between them? Eight? Seven? Make it as few as five! But, bless my soul, it took Nature thousands and thousands and thousands of centuries to make a man five times better than a worm. It required some evolution, eh? for matter to change from this beast that crawls on its belly to this beast that steals and kills and lies, and cheats, but that also writes a *Divine Comedy,* Signor Meis, a *Divine Comedy,* and is capable of the sacrifices your mother made for you and my mother made for me! And then—zip, it's all over, eh? Nothing again, eh? Zero, eh? Is it reasonable? Oh, yes, my nose, my foot, my leg—they become worm again. But not my soul, my dear sir! Not my soul! Matter, I grant you,

but not matter like my nose, or my feet, or my leg, Mr. Meis. Is it reasonable?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Paleari," I interrupted. "Here you have a great man—a genius—walking along the street. He slips on a banana peel, bumps the back of his head —and suddenly he loses his mind! Now, where's his soul?"

Signor Anselmo stopped and looked at me, as though someone had just thrown a mill-stone down in front of him on the floor.

"Where's his soul?"

"Yes. Take you or me. . . . Well, take me, though I'm not a great man. I've got—oh, let's be modest—some intelligence. However, I go walking along the street, I fall, I fracture my skull, I become a half-wit. Where's my soul?"

Paleari joined his two hands, with a smile of benign compassion. Then he answered:

"But why on earth should you fall and break your head, my dear Mr. Meis?"

"Just for an hypothesis."

"Not at all! Not at all! You go walking right along about your business! Why bother to fall? There are plenty of old people who lose their minds in course of nature without needing to fall and break their heads. You are trying to prove by that argument, that since the soul seems to weaken with the infirmity of the body, it must die when the body dies? But excuse me, just think of the matter the other way round. Take cases of very bad bodies that have nevertheless held brilliant souls: Giacomo Leopardi, for instance; or old men, like His Holiness, Pope Leo XIII. What do you say to that? Now, imagine a piano and a person play-

ing on it. At a certain point, the instrument gets out of tune, then one wire breaks; then two; then three more. With his piano in that condition the man is going to play badly, isn't he, great artist though he be? Now finally the piano stops working altogether. Do you mean that the player has ceased to exist?"

"I see: our brain is the piano; and the pianist our soul?"

"Exactly, Mr. Meis, though the illustration is old and trite. If the brain goes wrong, the soul expresses itself badly: imbecility, madness, what not. Just as when the pianist, perhaps accidentally, perhaps carelessly, perhaps deliberately, spoils the piano, he has to pay. And down to the last cent, too, he has to pay! There is exact compensation for everything. But that's another question. Excuse me, does it mean nothing to you that all humanity, as far back as history goes, has always had faith in another life? It's a fact, Mr. Meis, a fact—real proof!"

"May be the instinct for self-preservation . . ."

"No sir, no sir! What do I care about this bag of skin and bones I have to carry around with me? It's a jolly nuisance. I put up with it, because I know I have to. But now if you come and demonstrate to me, that after I've lugged it around for five, six, ten years more, there's nothing to it anyhow, that it's all over then and there, why—I just get rid of it right now, this very minute. So where is your instinct for self-preservation? I keep going because I feel that it can't all end that way. But, you may say, the individual man is one thing, and the race another; that the individual perishes while the race continues its evolution. Fine reasoning that, I must say. Just consider: as though humanity were

not I, and I humanity; as though we were not, all of us together, one whole! And doesn't every one of us feel the same way—that it would be the most absurd, the most atrocious thing conceivable if there were nothing to us but this miserable breath of air which we call earthly life? Fifty, sixty years of hardship, of toil, of suffering—all for what? For nothing? For humanity! But supposing humanity itself comes to an end some day! Just think of it! In that case all this life of ours, all this progress, all this evolution—for nothing? And they say, meantime, that there can be no such thing as "nothing," non-being pure and simple! Life is merely the convalescence of a sick planet—eh?—as you said the other day. Very well, call it that; but we must see what we mean by it. The trouble with science, Mr. Meis, is that it bothers too much about life, to the exclusion of other things . . ."

"Naturally," I sighed, with a smile, "because we've got to live . . ."

"But we've also got to die," Paleari rejoined.

"I understand; but why worry so much about it all the time?"

"Why? Why, because we can't understand life, unless we know something about death. The governing criteria for all our actions, the guiding line that will lead us from the labyrinth, the light of our eyes in short, Mr. Meis, must come to us from over there, from beyond the tomb, from beyond death!"

"Light from so much darkness?"

"Darkness? It may be dark to you; but light a little lamp there, the lamp of faith, burning with the pure oil of the soul! Without such a lamp we grope about like so many blind men on this earth—for all of the

electric lights we may have invented. Incandescent bulbs work all right for this life, Mr. Meis, but we need something that will give us a glimmer, at least, for death. By the way, Mr. Meis, I'm doing my bit with a little red lantern which I light on certain evenings—we all ought to contribute what we can to the common effort for knowledge. Just now, my son-in-law, Mr. Terenzio Papiano, is away at Naples. But he'll be back in a few weeks; and I will invite you to one of our séances. And who knows—perhaps that poor insignificant red lantern of mine—well, anyhow—you wait and see . . ."

I need hardly say that Mr. Anselmo Paleari did not make very agreeable company; but, as I thought the matter over, could I, without risk, that is to say without feeling the constant obligation to deceive, hope for some society more in touch with the world? And my mind went back to Cavaliere Tito Lenzi. Now this old man, Anselmo Paleari, took no interest in me whatever. He was satisfied so long as I would listen while he talked. Almost every morning, after he had taken a long and careful bath, he would go with me for a stroll, now up the Janiculum, now to the Aventine, now to Monte Mario and sometimes as far as the Ponte Nomentano. And all the while we would be talking about death.

"And this," I would mutter, "is what I have gained by not really dying in the first place!"

Occasionally I would try to start a conversation on some other subject, but Paleari seemed blind to all the life about him. He would walk along with his hat in his hand, every now and then raising it as though in greeting to some passing ghost. If I called his attention to anything he would comment:

"Nonsense!"

Once he turned on me suddenly with a personal question:

"Why are you living here in Rome?"

I shrugged my shoulders and answered:

"I rather like the place."

"And yet it is a gloomy city," he commented, shaking his head. "Many people express surprise that nothing ever seems to succeed here, that no modern idea ever seems able to take root in the soil. That's because they don't understand that Rome is a dead city."

"Even Rome is dead?" I exclaimed in mock consternation.

"She has been for a long time, Mr. Meis. And, believe me, it's no use trying to bring her back to life. Sleeping in the dream of her glorious past, she will have nothing to do with this miserable petty life that is swarming around her. When a city has had a life such as Rome has had, a life with so many definitely individual features, it cannot become a modern city, a city, that is, like any other city. Rome lies over there, with her great heart broken to fragments on the spurs of the Capitol. New buildings go up—but do they belong to Rome? Look, Mr. Meis. My daughter, Adriana, told me about the holy water font that was in your room; and she took it out, remember? Well, the other day she dropped it and it broke on the floor. Only the basin itself was left. That is now on the writing desk in my room; I am using it deliberately, as you did, the first time I believe, by inadvertence. Well, that's the way it is with Rome, Mr. Meis. The Popes, in their fashion, made of her a vessel for holy water. We Italians have turned her into an ash tray. We have flocked

here from all over Italy to knock the ash off the ends of our cigars. What but cigar ash is the frivolity of this cheap, this worthless life we are leading and the bitter poisonous pleasure it affords us?"

XI

Night . . . and the River

THE more intimate my relations with the family became through the respect Paleari had for my judgment and the personal good will he was always evincing toward me, the more uneasy I felt in my own mind, my secret misgivings often amounting to acute remorse that I should be making my way into that home under an assumed name, under an actual disguise, with a wholly fictitious personality (if indeed I were a person at all). I was ever resolving to hold myself as much aloof as possible, trying continually to remember that I could have no share in other people's lives, that I must shun intimate contacts and do the best I could with my own solitary existence apart.

'I am free,'' I would keep repeating to myself. ''I am free!'' But I was already beginning to understand the meaning and the limits of such freedom.

At present, for instance, it meant my unquestioned right to sit of an evening at the window of my room, looking out upon the river, as it flowed black and silent between its new walls of granite, down under the bridges which spangled the water with wriggling serpents of flame from their many lights. And my fancy would run back along the stream to its distant sources in the hills, whence it came down across fields and

meadows, fields and meadows, to reach the city in front of me, passing on into fields and meadows again till at last it reached the dark palpitating sea. What did it do when it got there? Pua-a-h! A yawn! This freedom! This freedom!

But yet, would I be better off anywhere else?

On the balcony near by I would see, some evenings, the little house-mother in her big dress, busily watering her potted plants. "There is living for you," I would say to myself, watching the child in her affectionate attentions to the flowers she loved, and hoping that sooner or later she would lift her eyes toward my window.

She never did. She knew that I was there, but whenever she was alone, she pretended not to notice. Why? Shyness, perhaps? Or was she nursing a secret grudge against me because I so obstinately refused to see in her anything more than the child she was?

"Ah, now she is setting the watering pot on the floor. Her work is done! She is standing there, her arms resting on the parapet of the balcony, looking out over the river as I am doing—perhaps to show me that she is quite indifferent as to whether I exist or not; because—I should say so!—because a woman with her responsibilities has very serious thoughts of her own to ponder, yes indeed! Hence that meditative pose! Hence a need for solitude for her as well!"

And I smiled at my own idea of her! But afterwards, as I saw her vanish suddenly from the balcony, I wondered: might my guess not be wrong—the fruit of the instinctive vexation we feel at seeing ourselves taken as a matter of course?

"And yet, why not? Why should she notice me? Why should she speak to me unless she has to? What

do I stand for in this house, unless it be the misfortune that has overtaken her, her father's incompetence and folly, her humiliation, personified? When her father still had his position in the service, she did not need to let her rooms and have outsiders about the house—especially outsiders like me—an outsider with a cock-eye, and blue glasses!"

The noise of a wagon pounding across the wooden bridge near by would rouse me from my reverie. I would rise from my seat at the window, puffing an exclamation of nausea through my closed lips. Here was my bed; and here my books! Which? With a shrug of the shoulders, I would catch up my hat, jam it down on my head, and go out of the house, hoping to find in the streets some diversion from my galling tedium.

The walk I chose would depend upon the inspiration of the moment: now I would seek the most crowded thoroughfares, then again some deserted solitary quarter. One night, I remember, I went to the square of Saint Peter's; and I remember also the weird impression of unreality I got from that aeon-old world enfolded by the two arms of the Portico—a world illumined by a strange dream light, engulfed in a majestic silence only emphasized by the crash of water in the two fountains. In one of these I dipped my hands. Yes, here was something tangible: the cold, I could feel! All the rest was spectral, insubstantial, deeply melancholy in a silent motionless solemnity!

Returning along the Borgo Nuovo I happened on a drunken man, whom my sober thoughtful mood seemed to strike as something funny. He approached me on tip-toe, squatted down so as to look up into my face,

touched me cautiously on the elbow and finally shouted:

"Cheer up, brother! Let's see you crack a smile!"

I looked at the man from head to foot, hardly awake as yet to what had happened. And again he said, but in a confidential whisper:

"Cheer up, brother! To hell with it all! Just forget it. Crack a smile!"

Then he moved along, supporting his tottering form against the wall.

There in that solitary place under the very shadow of the great sanctum, the fortuitous appearance of that drunken man, giving me his strangely intimate and strangely profound advice, seemed to daze me. I stood looking after him till he disappeared in the dark: then, I burst into a loud harsh bitter laugh:

"Cheer up! Yes, brother! But I can't roll from tavern to tavern as you are doing, looking for happiness, as you are doing, at the bottom of a mug of wine! I should never find it there—nor anywhere else. I go to the café, my dear sir, where I find respectable people —smoking and talking politics! Cheer up, you say! But, my dear sir, people can be happy only on one condition—I am quoting you a reactionary, who frequents my respectable café: on the condition, namely that we be governed by a good old-fashioned absolutist! You are only a poor beggar, my dear sir, you know nothing about such things. But it's the fact nevertheless. What's the trouble with people like me? Why are we so glum? Democracy, my dear sir, democracy! Government by the majority! When you have one boss, he knows that it's his job to satisfy many people; but when everybody has a say in running things, everybody thinks of satisfying himself. And what do we get?

Tyranny, my dear sir, in its most stupid form: tyranny masked as liberty! Of course you do! What do you think is the matter with me? Just what I say: tyranny disguised as liberty! Pua-a-h! Let's go home again!"

But that was to be a night of adventures.

I was going through the dimly lighted Tordinona district, when I heard smothered cries coming from a dark alley off my street; and then there was a rush of people engaged in a rough-and-tumble, four men, as it proved, using heavy canes on a woman of the sidewalks.

Now I mention this little episode not to show what a brave man I can be on occasion, but just to tell how frightened I was at some of its consequences. When I interfered they turned on me—four against one and two with their knives out. I had a good stocky cane myself and I swung it around, jumping about a good deal to avoid an attack from behind. At last the metal knob of my cane reached one of my antagonists full on the head. He staggered away, and finally took to his heels. Since the woman had been screaming at the top of her lungs, the other three thought it was time to be going too. I don't remember exactly how I got a deep cut in the middle of my forehead. My first thought was to get the woman quieted down: but when she saw the blood streaming over my face, she began to shout for help louder than ever, trying also to wipe my wound with a silk handkerchief she had removed from her neck:

"No, let me alone, for heaven's sake!" I protested in disgust. "Get away from here, at once . . . I'm all right! They'll be arresting you!"

I hurried to a fountain on the bridge near by to wash the blood from my eyes. But by this time, two policemen had come running up, and they insisted on know-

ing what all the noise was about. The woman, who was a Neapolitan and liked to dramatize in the manner of her people, began to narrate the *guaio,* the "woe," she had been through, addressing the tenderest words of praise in my direction. The gendarmes insisted on my going to the station with them to give a full account of my rescue; and it was not an easy matter to dissuade them from this idea. A pretty scrape that would have been for me! My name and address on the police roster! And a write-up in the papers, the next day! Adriano Meis, a hero! I, whose duty it was to keep out of sight, in the dark, and not attract anyone's attention!

Not even a hero, could I be, then—unless I wanted to pay for the pleasure with my scalp. . . .

On the other hand, since I was dead already, when you think of it . . . why worry so much about that precious scalp?

* * * * *

"Are you a widower, Mr. Meis . . . if I do not seem impertinent?"

This question was leveled at me, point blank, one evening by Miss Silvia Caporale, as I was sitting with her and Adriana on the balcony where they had invited me to join them.

Caught off my guard, I was embarrassed momentarily for an answer:

"I, a widower? No! Why do you ask?"

"Why I notice that you are always rubbing the third finger of your left hand round and round, this way, as though you were playing with a wedding ring that isn't there. He does, doesn't he, Adriana!"

Now that will give you some idea of what women can

do with their eyes, or at least some women; for Adriana confessed that she had never observed the habit in me.

"Well, it's probably because your attention was never called to it," the piano teacher answered.

I thought it best to explain that though I was not myself aware of such an idiosyncrasy, it might well be as Miss Caporale said:

"Years ago I did wear a ring on that finger for a long time; at last I had to have it cut by a goldsmith because it got too tight as my finger grew!"

"Poor little ring," said the forty-year-older, who was in a mood for sentimentalizing that evening. "It didn't want to come off? It hugged you so tight? Must have had some beautiful memory to . . ."

"Silvia!" little Adriana interrupted, reprovingly.

"What's the harm?" the Caporale woman rejoined. "I was going to say that it must have been a question of a first love of yours. . . . Come, Mr. Meis, tell us something about yourself. . . . Are you never really going to open up? . . ."

"Well, you see," said I, "I was thinking of the inference you just drew from my habit of rubbing my ring finger—a quite arbitrary inference, if I may say so, signorina. So far as I have observed widowers do not discontinue their rings, as a rule—on the theory, I suppose, that it was the wife rather than the ring that caused all the trouble. Veteran soldiers are proud of the medals they earned in combat, aren't they? For the same reason widowers stick to their wedding rings."

"Oh yes," my inquisitor insisted, "you're cleverly changing the subject!"

"How can you say that? My intention rather was to go into it more deeply."

"More deeply, nonsense! I'm not interested in the deeps. I just had the impression—and stopped there, at the surface!"

"The impression that I was a widower?"

"Yes. And what would you say, Adriana? Don't you think Mr. Meis looks like one?"

Adriana glanced at me furtively, but she at once lowered her eyes, too bashful long to sustain anybody's gaze. With her usual faint smile—so sweet and sorrowful it always seemed to me—she answered:

"How should I know what widowers look like? You're so funny, Silvia!"

Some unpleasant thought, some unwelcome image, must have flitted across her mind as she said that; for her face darkened and she turned away to look down into the river beneath us. And the other woman doubtless understood what it was: for she also turned and began looking at the view. I was puzzled for a moment; but at last, as my attention rested on Adriana's black-bordered wrapper, I thought I knew. Yes, a fourth person, an invisible one, had intruded on our party. Terenzio Papiano, the man who had gone to Naples, was a widower. I guessed from the exchange which I had just heard that he probably did not suggest the mourner—an air which Miss Caporale found it easier to detect in me.

I confess that this unhappy turn to the conversation did not at first displease me. Tactlessly Miss Caporale had blundered into Adriana's bitterness over her dead sister's troubles, and the little girl's suffering was the proper punishment for such an indiscretion. But then I considered: looking at the matter from the woman's point of view, might not this curiosity of hers, which

to me seemed rank impertinence, be a very natural and justifiable thing? The mystery that hung about my person must surely impress people! And now since I could not endure keeping to myself, since I could not resist the temptation to seek the companionship of others, I must be resigned to the necessity of answering the questions which possible friends had every right to ask me as a step to finding out with whom they had to deal. There would be, moreover, only one way to answer: by making up as I went along, by telling lies outright. There was no middle ground. So then the fault was not theirs but mine. Lying would, of course, make the fault worse; but if I could not accept the situation, I should go away, take up again my solitary and silent wanderings!

I could not fail to notice that Adriana herself, though she never pressed me with a question even remotely indiscreet, was all ears whenever the Caporale woman pushed her inquiries beyond, I must say, the reasonable limits of natural and excusable curiosity.

One evening, for example, there on the balcony where we now quite regularly met after I came home from dinner, she started to ask me something, laughing meanwhile and wrestling playfully with Adriana; for the little girl was shouting: "No, Silvia, don't you dare! Don't you dare! I shall be cross!"

"Listen, Mr. Meis," said Silvia; "Adriana wants to know why you don't wear at least a mustache . . ."

"Don't you believe her, Mr. Meis, don't you believe her! She was the one who . . . I didn't . . ."

And the little housemother was so much in earnest that she burst suddenly into tears.

"There, there, there!" said Miss Caporale, trying to

comfort her. "Oh, don't cry! I was only fooling! Besides, what's the harm?"

"The harm is—I didn't say any such thing. And it isn't fair! Look, Mr. Meis . . . we were talking of actors who are all . . . well, that way . . . and then she said: 'Yes, like Mr. Meis? Who knows why he doesn't grow at least a mustache?' And I repeated after her: 'Yes, who knows?'"

"Well," answered Silvia, "when a person says 'Who knows,' it means that that person wants to know . . ."

"But you said it first, not I," said Adriana, boiling.

"May I interrupt?" I asked, with the idea of making peace.

"No, you may not!" snapped Adriana. "Good night, Mr. Meis!" And she was away into the house.

But Silvia Caporale brought her back by main force:

"Don't be silly, Adriana . . . I was only joking. What a little spitfire you are! Now Mr. Meis is a dear nice man, and he doesn't mind—do you, Mr. Meis? You see? He's now going to tell us why he doesn't grow at least a mustache!"

And Adriana laughed this time, though her eyes were still wet with tears.

"Because," I whispered hoarsely, "because . . . I belong to a secret order of conspirators that prohibits hair on the face!"

"We don't believe it," whispered Silvia, in the same hoarse tragic manner; "but we do know that you are a man of mystery. Explain yourself, sir! What were you doing at the General Delivery window in the post-office this afternoon?"

"I, at the Post-Office?"

"Yes sir! Do you deny it? About four o'clock! I

was at San Silvestro myself, and I saw you with my own eyes!"

"It must have been my double, signorina. I was not there!"

"Oh, of course, you weren't! Of course you weren't!" said Silvia incredulously. "Secret correspondence, eh? Because, it's true—isn't it, Adriana?—that this gentleman never gets a letter here! The charwoman told me so, notice!"

Adriana moved uneasily on her chair. She did not like this kind of jesting.

"Don't you mind her," said she, sweeping me with a rapid, apologetic and almost caressing glance. "Don't you mind her!"

"No, I get no mail, either here, or at the Post Office!" I answered. "That, alas, is the sorry truth! No one writes to me for the simple reason that there is no one to do so!"

"Not even a friend? Not even one friend in the whole wide world?"

"Not even one! Just I and my shadow, on the face of the earth! We are good friends, I and my shadow! I take him with me everyhere I go; but I never stopped long enough in one place to make any other lasting acquaintances!"

"Lucky man," exclaimed Silvia with a sigh. "It must be wonderful to travel all one's life. Well, tell us about your travels. There now! . . . Since you refuse to talk about everything else . . . !"

Once the shoals of these first embarrassing questions passed, keeping off here with the oar of the big lie, avoiding shipwreck there with another, veering warily again with still a third, I brought the bark of my fiction

through the waters of danger and finally spread my sails to the full breeze on the open sea of fancy.

Strange!—But after a year or more of enforced silence, I now indulged in an orgy of talking. Every evening there on the balcony, I would talk and talk and talk—of my rambling about in the world, of the things I had seen, of the impressions I had received, of the incidents that had happened to me. I was myself astonished at the wealth of observation I had stored up in my mind during my travels, deep buried there during my silence but now coming to vigorous eloquent life again on my lips. And this wonder that I felt must have lent extraordinary color and enthusiasm to my narratives. From the pleasure the two ladies evidently took in the things I described, I came little by little to experience a sort of mournful regret that I had not myself been able to enjoy them more; and this undertone of nostalgic yearning added another charm to my story.

After a few evenings, Miss Caporale's attitude toward me, as well as the expression on her face, changed radically. The heavy languor now veiling her great sorrowful bulging eyes made them look more than ever like doll's eyes opening and closing with lead weights inside her head; and this strident sentimentality strengthened the contrast between them and her blank masklike face.

There was no doubt about it: Silvia Caporale was falling in love with me!

The naïve surprise this discovery gave me was proof certain, to myself, that I had not at all been talking for her, all that while, but for the other, the little girl, who sat there by the hour listening silently and attentively. Adriana, for that matter, seemed to have under-

stood so, too; for by a sort of tacit agreement we began smiling to one another at the comic and quite unforeseen effects my chats were having on the heart-strings of this susceptible old maid of the piano lessons.

* * * * *

Yet this second discovery, I must hasten to caution, awakened in me only thoughts of the most tender purity as regards my little house-mother. How could such innocence, touched with its delicate suffusion of sadness, inspire any others? What joy it gave me that first proof of confidence, a proof as overt, yet as diffident, as her childish bashfulness would allow! Now it would be a fleeting glance, the flash across her features of a softer beauty; now it would be a smile of mortified pity for the absurd fatuity of the older woman—or, indeed, a reproof darted at me from her eyes, or suggested by a toss of her head, when I, for our secret amusement, would go a little too far in paying out string to the falcon of that poor woman's hopes, a falcon which now soared high and free in the heavens of beatitude or now flapped and fluttered in distress at some sudden pull toward the solid earth that I would give.

"You cannot be a man of much heart," Miss Caporale remarked on one occasion, "if it is true, as you say—not that I believe you—that you have gone along immune through all your life!"

"Immune, signorina? Immune from what?"

"You know very well from what! I mean, without falling in love!"

"Oh never, signorina, never, never, never!"

"Well, how about that ring that grew so tight you had to have it filed off? Never, never, never, never?"

"Oh, it began to hurt, you see. I thought I told you! But anyhow, it was a present from my grandfather!"

"What a whopper!"

"True as preaching! Why, I can even tell you when and where. Rather amusing, too, at that! It was at Florence, and grandpa and I were coming out of the Uffizi. You could never guess why I got the ring! It was because I—I was twelve years old at the time, by the way—I had mistaken a Perugino for a Raphael. Just so, signorina! I made the mistake, and as a reward for making it, I got the ring—Grandpa bought it at one of the booths on the Ponte Vecchio! As I later learned, grandpa, for reasons best known to himself, had made up his mind that that particular picture had been falsely attributed to Perugino and really belonged to Raphael! Hence his delight at my blunder! Well now, you understand, there's some difference between the hand of a boy twelve years old and this paddle I have at present. Notice how big it is? You can't just see a baby ring on such a paw, can you? But you say I have no heart, signorina. That's probably an exaggeration. I have one; but I have also a little common sense. You see, I look at myself in the mirror—through these glasses which, being dark, tend to soften the shock—and I wilt, signorina, I wilt. 'Look a-here, Adriano, old fellow,' I say to myself, 'you don't seriously think a woman is ever going to fall for that face!' "

"Why the idea!" exclaimed the old maid. "You pretend to be doing justice to yourself in that kind of talk? Anyway, you are very unjust toward us women. Because, take my word for it, Mr. Meis, women are more generous than men; they don't attach so much

importance to good looks which, after all, are only skin deep!"

"Yes, but I'm afraid they'd have to be more courageous than men, too, before I would have any chance. It would take a pretty desperate valor to face a prospect like me!"

"Oh, get out, Mr. Meis; you enjoy depreciating yourself, I am sure. You say you are uglier than you really are; and I believe you try to make yourself uglier than you really are!"

"You hit it right, that time. And do you know why I do? To escape being pitied by people! If I tried to dandy up a bit, do you know what folks would say? 'See that poor devil! He thinks a mustache can help that face of his!' Whereas, this way, no trouble! A scarecrow—but a frank honest-to-God one—with no pretensions! Admit that I am right, signorina!"

The piano teacher sighed expressively:

"I'll admit you're all wrong. I don't say a mustache, perhaps; but if you tried growing a vandyke, let us say, you would soon see what a distinguished and even handsome man you could be!"

"And this eye of mine, if you please?"

"Oh well, if we are going to talk that frankly—do you know, I have been thinking of making the suggestion for some days past! Why don't you have an operation, to set it straight? Perfectly simple matter! Hardly any inconvenience at all; and in a few days you are rid of this last slight imperfection!"

"Aha, I've caught you!" said I. "Women may be more generous than men, signorina, but I must point out to you that, a touch here and a touch there, you have been making me a whole new face!"

Why had I so deliberately prolonged this conversation? Did I, for Adriana's benefit, really want the Caporale woman to say in so many words, that she could love me, indeed that she actually did love me, in spite of my insignificant chin and my vagrant eye? No, that was not the reason: I fomented all those questions and answers because I observed the pleasure that Adriana, perhaps unconsciously, kept experiencing every time the music teacher refuted me triumphantly!

So I understood that, despite my odd appearance, the girl might be able to love me. I did not say as much even to myself; but from that evening the bed I slept on in that house seemed softer to me, the objects in my room more homelike and familiar, lighter the air I breathed, bluer the sky, more glorious the sun! Though I still pretended to myself that the change all came about because the late Mattia Pascal had died his miserable death back there in the mill-flume of "The Coops"; and because I, Adriano Meis, after a year of aimless wandering in the boundless uncharted freedom I had found, was at last getting to my course, attaining the ideal I had set before me to become another man, to live another life—a life which I could now feel gushing vibrant, palpitant, within me!

And the poison of depression with which bitter experience had filled me was expelled from my soul and body: I became gay again as I had been in the days of my boyhood. Even Anselmo Paleari ceased to be the bore I had found him at first, the gloom of his philosophy evaporating under the sunlight of my new joy.

Poor old Anselmo! Of the two things which, according to him, were proper matters for concern to people on this earth, he did not realize that he was thinking

by this time of only one! But, come now, be honest! Hadn't he thought of living too, in his better days? Just a little?

More deserving of pity than he, surely, was the *maestra* Caporale who failed to find even in wine the gaiety of that unforgettable drunkard of the Borgo Nuovo! She yearned to live, poor thing; and she thought it was unkind of men to fix only on the beauty that was skin deep! So she supposed her soul, away down underneath, was a beautiful thing, probably! And who knows? Perhaps she might be capable of many, and even great, sacrifices,—of giving up her wine, for example—once she found a truly "generous" man.

"If to err is human," I reflected, "ought we not conclude that justice is a supreme cruelty?"

I resolved, at any rate, to be cruel no longer toward Miss Silvia Caporale; resolved, I say; for I was cruel, nevertheless, without meaning to be, and the more cruel the less I meant to be. My affability proved to be fresh fuel for the flames of her very unstable passion; and we were soon at this pass: that everything I said would bring a pallor to her cheeks, and a blush to the cheeks of Adriana. There was nothing deliberate in my choice of words or subjects; but I was sure that nothing I was saying had the effect, whether by its tone or by its manner of expression, of rousing this girl (to whom I was really speaking all the while) to such an extent as to break the harmony which in our good way had been established between us.

Souls have some mysterious device for finding each other out while our exterior selves are still entangled in the formalities of conventional discourse. They have needs and aspirations of their own which, in view of

the impossibility of satisfying those needs and of realizing those aspirations, our bodies refuse to recognize. And that is why two people, whose souls are talking to each other, experience an intolerable embarrassment, a violent repulsion against any kind of material contact, when they are left alone somewhere; though the atmosphere clears again, the moment a third person intervenes. Then the uneasiness vanishes, the two souls find instant relief, resume their intercourse, smiling at each other from a safe distance.

How often was this the case with me and Adriana, her distress, however, coming from the shyness, the unassuming modesty, native to her; while mine, as I believed, was due to the remorse I felt at the lie I was obliged to live, imposing my devious and complicated fictioning upon the ingenuity and candid innocence of that sweet, gentle, defenceless creature!

For a month past she had been quite transfigured in my eyes. And was she not a different girl, in fact? Was there not an inner glow in the fugitive glances she now gave me? And her smiles—did not their lighter, more wholesome joy bear witness that she was finding her life as a drudge more bearable, that she was wearing more naturally that demeanor as a responsible grown-up housekeeper which had at first so much amused me?

Ah yes, perhaps she was instinctively yielding to the need I myself felt of dreaming of a new life, without trying to think out what that life must be, nor how it could be made possible. A vague yearning, in her case as in mine, had opened, for her as for me, a window on the future, through which a flood of intoxicating joyous light was streaming—neither of us daring to approach the window, meantime, whether to draw the

shutters or to see just what the prospect beyond might be.

Our pure and exhilarating happiness had its secondary effects on poor Silvia also.

"By the way, signorina," I said to her one evening; "do you know I have almost made up my mind to follow your advice?"

"What advice?" she asked.

"To have an operation on my eye."

She clapped her hands gaily:

"Oh, that's such good news. Go to Doctor Ambrosini—he's the best one in town. He did a cataract for my poor mamma once. What did I tell you, Adriana? The mirror did settle the question! I was sure it would!"

Adriana smiled, as I did.

"It wasn't the mirror, though, signorina," I observed. "It's a matter of necessity. My eye has been giving me some trouble recently. It was never of much use to me; but I shouldn't care to lose it."

And I was lying! It was just as Miss Caporale had said it was: the looking-glass did convince me. The looking-glass told me that if a relatively simple operation could obliterate the one particularly odious feature bequeathed to Adriano Meis by the late Mattia Pascal, the former might then dispense with the blue glasses also, take on a bit of mustache again, and, in general, bring his unfortunate physiognomy into reasonably close alignment with the inner transformation of his outlook on life!

* * * * *

This blissful state of mind was to be rudely disturbed by a scene which I witnessed, a few nights later, concealed behind the shutters of one of my windows.

I had been on the balcony with the two ladies until nearly ten o'clock. Then I retired to my room and was reading with more or less interest a favorite book of old Anselmo—"Reincarnation."

Suddenly I thought I heard voices outside on the balcony; and I listened to discover whether Adriana's was among them. No: there were two people, talking in suppressed tones but with some animation. One was a man: and his voice was not that of Paleari. Since there were, to my knowledge, no other males in the house except myself, my curiosity was aroused. I stepped to the window, and peered out through one of the openings in the shutters.

Dark as it was, I thought I could recognize Silvia Caporale in the woman; but who was the man she was talking with? Could Terenzio Papiano have returned, unexpectedly, from Naples?

Something the piano teacher said in a louder tone than usual gave me to understand that they were discussing me. I crowded closer to the shutters and listened anxiously.

The man seemed angry at whatever the woman had been saying about me; and she was now evidently trying to attenuate the unfavorable impression her words had given.

"Rich?" I finally heard the man ask.

"That I can't say!" the woman replied. "It looks as though he were. He lives on whatever he has, without working . . ."

"Always about the house?"

"Why no! But anyhow, you will see him tomorrow yourself."

The "you" was a "tu," in the intimate Italian form.

So she knew him as well as that! Could Papiano (there was no longer any doubt that it was he) be the lover of Miss Silvia Caporale? And, in that case, why had she been so much taken up with me during all this time?

My curiosity was now at fever heat, but as luck would have it, they talked on in a much lower and quite inaudible tone of voice.

Not being able to hear anything, I tried to do what I could with my eyes. Suddenly I saw the music teacher lay a hand on Papiano's shoulder, an attention which he rudely rebuffed before long. When the Caporale woman spoke again she raised her voice in evident exasperation:

"But how could I help it? Who am I? What do I represent in this house?"

"You tell Adriana to start herself out here," the man ordered sharply.

Hearing the girl's name pronounced in that manner, I clenched my fists, my blood running cold in my veins.

"But she's in bed!" said Silvia.

The man answered angrily, threateningly:

"Well, get her out of bed, and be quick about it, too."

I don't know how I kept from throwing the shutters open. The effort I made to control myself, however, cleared my head for an instant; and the words which Silvia Caporale had uttered in such irritation about herself came to my own lips:

"Who am I? What do I represent in this house?"

I drew back from the window. But then a justification for my eavesdropping occurred to me: those two people had been talking of me. Whatever they were

saying was my legitimate concern, therefore; and now they were going to talk of the same matter with Adriana. I had a right to know what that fellow's attitude was toward me!

The readiness with which I seized on this excuse for my indelicate conduct in spying on people without their knowing suddenly revealed to me that greater than my anxiety about myself was my interest at that moment in some one else.

I went back to my post behind the shutters.

The Caporale woman had disappeared; the man, all alone, was leaning with his elbows on the railing of the balcony, looking down into the water, his head sunk nervously between his two hands.

An eye to an opening in the shutters, my hands clutching at my two knees, I stood there waiting in indescribable anxiety for Adriana to come out on the balcony. The fact that she was slow in doing so did not exasperate me at all; on the contrary it gave me the greatest satisfaction. I guessed, I don't know why, that Adriana was refusing to do the bidding of this bully. In fact I could imagine Silvia Caporale urging her, begging her, beseeching her to obey.

The man, meantime, stood there at the railing, fuming with anger and impatience. I was hoping that the woman would come back eventually to say that Adriana was unwilling to get up. But no, here she was, herself, the teacher appearing in the doorway behind her!

Papiano turned on the two women:

"You go to bed," he ordered, speaking to Silvia. "I have something to say to my sister-in-law."

The woman withdrew.

Papiano now stepped over to close the folding door

that opened from the dining room out on the balcony.

"No you don't!" said Adriana, backing up against the door.

"But I have something to say to you!" the man uttered vehemently under his breath, trying to make as little noise as possible.

"Well, say it!" said Adriana. "What do you want? You might have waited till morning!"

"No, I am going to say it now!" And he seized her violently by one arm, dragging her forward on the balcony.

"Let me alone," Adriana screamed, struggling to release his hold.

I slammed the shutters back, and appeared at the window:

"Oh, Mr. Meis," called Adriana. "Will you please step out here!"

"Very gladly, signorina!" I answered.

My heart leapt with a thrill of grateful joy! In a bound I was out into the corridor leading to the dining room.

But there, near the entrance to my room, coiled, as it were, on a trunk that had been just brought in, was a slender, light-haired youth, with a very long and seemingly transparent face, barely opening a pair of languid stupefied blue eyes.

I drew up with a start, and looked at him. A thought flashed through my mind: "The brother of Papiano, Adriana once mentioned!" I hurried on and came out on the balcony.

"May I introduce my brother-in-law, Mr. Meis? Terenzio Papiano! He has just come in from Naples."

"Delighted! Most happy!" the man exclaimed, tak-

ing off his hat, slouching through a reptilian bow, and pressing my hand warmly. "I'm sorry I have been away from Rome all this time; but I trust my little sister here has looked after you satisfactorily? If you need anything for your room, I hope you will feel quite free in letting me know. . . . Is your work table just what you need? I thought perhaps a broader one might serve your purposes better. . . . But if there's anything else. . . . We like to do our best by the guests who honor us . . ."

"Thank you, thank you," I interrupted. "I am quite comfortable! Thank you!"

"Thank you, rather. . . . Or, if I can be of any service in any other way. . . . I have some connections. . . . But Adriana, dear, I woke you up. Run along back to bed, if you're sleepy . . . !"

"Oh," said Adriana, smiling her usual sad smile, "now that I'm up again . . ."

And she stepped to the railing, looking out over the water.

I felt instinctively that she did not want to leave me alone with the man. What was she afraid of?

She stood there leaning meditatively against the parapet; while the man, with his hat still in his hand, kept up a stream of chatter. Had been to Naples—detained there much longer than he had been expecting. And such a lot of work! Copying documents, you see, bundles of them, in the private archives of her Excellency the Duchess, Donna Teresa Ravaschieri Fieschi—"Mamma Duchessa," as everybody called her, though "Mamma Big Heart" would have been a better name! Papers of extraordinary interest, from certain points of view: new light on the overthrow of the Two Sicilies, and

especially on the rôle in that episode of Gaetano Filangieri, prince of Satriano, whose life the Marquis Giglio (don Ignazio Giglio d'Auletta, that is—he, Papiano, was the private secretary of the Marquis) was intending to illuminate in a very careful and sincere biography! Sincere—let us be frank!—sincere, so far as the Marquis's devotion and loyalty to the old Bourbons would permit. . . .

The man seemed to have been wound up. There was no stopping him. He liked to hear himself talk, orating, almost, with the mannerisms of an experienced actor, a dramatic pause here, a subdued chuckle there, an expressive gesture in some other place.

I could not master my astonishment. I stood there rigid as a block of stone, nodding every now and then at the lecturer, but with my eyes on Adriana, who was still leaning against the railing, looking out over the river.

"After all, what can a fellow do!" Papiano intoned, for a peroration. "The Marquis is a Bourbon and a Clerical; while I, I, you understand—I am almost afraid to say it out loud in my own house!—I, well, every morning before I go to work, I step out here and wave my hand to Garibaldi up there on the Janiculum—ever notice his statue?—Good view of it from just here! Well, 'Hooray for the Twentieth of September,' say I; but I have to be secretary to the Marquis just the same. Fine fellow, and all that; but Bourbon, Clerical, Clerical, Bourbon, as bad as they make 'em. Well, bread and butter! You've got to live in this world. . . . Really, when I hear him carrying on, sometimes, I, as a good Italian, I feel like spitting on the fellow—if you'll pardon my strong language. Makes me sick, this

reactionary stuff! But it's a matter of bread and butter. So I stick it out! Yes, bread and butter talks . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders, struck his hands to his hips with a broad sweep suggesting helplessness, and laughed.

"Come, come, sisterchen," said he, running over to Adriana and putting his two hands gently on her shoulders, "time to be crawling in, isn't it? It's getting late; and I imagine Mr. Meis is tired too."

In bidding me good night at the door of my room, Adriana pressed my hand—something she had never done before; and I remember that, left alone, I kept my hand closed as though to preserve the sensation of that pressure.

All night long I lay awake thinking, a prey to indescribable anxiety. The ceremonious hypocrisy of the man, his insinuating, loquacious servility, the hostility I had discovered in him by my eavesdropping! He would certainly compel me to leave that house where, profiting by the dotage of the old man, he was certainly trying to make himself master. Just how would he go about getting me out? Some idea of his tactics I might have from his abrupt change of manner that evening when I appeared on the balcony. But why should he object to my presence there? Why was I not a roomer like any other? What could that Caporale woman have said to him about me? Could he be jealous of her?

Or was he jealous of someone else? His arrogant suspicious manner; his rude dismissal of the music teacher to get Adriana alone with him; the violence with which he addressed the girl; her refusal to come out, and coming out, to let him close the door behind her; the emotion she had previously shown every time her

absent brother-in-law was mentioned—yes, everything, everything filled me with the hateful suspicion that he had designs on her.

Well, why should that upset me so? After all, was it not easy for me to move away, if the fellow gave me the slightest annoyance? What was there to keep me? Nothing whatever! And yet what a tender thrill I felt as I remembered how Adriana had called to me from the balcony, as though asking me to protect her. And in bidding me good night how she had pressed my hand!

I had not closed the blinds of my room nor drawn the curtains. The moon rose, and as it sank toward morning, in the west, it appeared at my window, looked in upon me, to laugh at me, as it seemed, for finding me still awake:

"Ah, I understand, I understand, my boy. But you don't, do you! Oh no, you don't understand, you rascal!"

XII

Papiano Gets My Eye

"THE tragedy of Orestes in a puppet-theatre, Mr. Meis! Automatic dolls of new invention. At eight-thirty this evening, *via dei Prefetti,* number 54. Worth going to see, Mr. Meis!"

So the old gentleman, Anselmo Paleari was enunciating to me from my doorway.

"The tragedy of Orestes?" I answered.

"Yes, '*d'après Sophocle,*' so this flier reads. 'Electra,' I imagine. But listen, I've just thought of something. Supposing that, just at the climax, when the marionette representing Orestes is about to avenge his father's death on Aegisthos and his mother, someone should suddenly tear a hole in the paper ceiling over the stage—what would happen, do you think?"

"I give up," said I, shrugging my shoulders.

"Why, just think it out, Mr. Meis. Orestes, of course, would be quite flabbergasted by that hole in the sky."

"Why?"

"Let me finish . . . Orestes would be in the throes of his vengefulness, and intent on assuaging his thirst for blood; but lo, a rent in the sky! His eyes would turn up toward that, wouldn't they, and all sorts of evil influences would become apparent on the stage. He would droop and collapse. Orestes, in other words, would become Hamlet. The whole difference between

the ancient theatre and the modern comes down to that, I assure you, Mr. Meis—to a rent in a paper sky!"

And he went away, pattering along the hall in his slippers.

In just such a way, old Anselmo was wont to launch avalanches of thoughts from the foggy mountain tops of his moodiness. Their relevance to anything, their motivation, the connection between them, stayed up there in the clouds; for the person down below who had to dodge them it was often difficult to understand just what they meant. But this notion of Orestes thrown off his pins by a hole suddenly torn in the sky stayed with me for a long time. "Lucky marionettes," I sighed. "The make-believe heaven over their heads is rarely torn asunder; and if it is, it can be glued together again. They don't need to worry: they know neither perplexity, nor inhibition, nor scruple, nor sorrow, nor —anything. They can just sit still, enjoying their comedy, loving, respecting, admiring each other, never getting flustered, never losing their heads; because their characters and their actions are all proportioned to the blue roof that covers them.

"And the prototype of these marionettes, my dear Mr. Anselmo, you have right here in your own house, in the person of that precious son-in-law of yours, Mr. Terenzio Papiano. Could any marionette be better satisfied than he is with the pasteboard sky snugly stretched above his head—the comfortable and tranquil dwelling-place of a Deity who bestows with lavish hand, ready to close his eyes beforehand and to raise his hand in forgiveness afterwards, sleepily repeating after every sharp deal: 'I the Lord thy God help those who help themselves!'

"Your precious son-in-law, Mr. Terenzio Papiano, certainly helps himself, my dear Anselmo! Life for him is just one sharp turn after another. He has his finger in every pie—enterprising, jovial, enthusiastic, full of gumption and go!"

Forty years old was Papiano, tall of stature, sinewy of limb; inclined toward baldness, with a suggestion of gray in the heavy mustache he wore under his nose (a fine expressive nose with nostrils all a-quiver). Gray eyes, also—sharp, restless, as restless as his hands. He saw everything with those eyes! He touched everything with those fingers! He would be talking with me, for instance; but, in some way, I don't know how, he would see that Adriana, busy with her cleaning away off behind him, was having difficulty in getting a piece of furniture into place again.

"Excuse me! . . ." he would say like a flash, and then run to his sister-in-law, and take the business out of her hands:

"Look, girl, this is the way we do it, see?"

And he would dust it off himself, shove it into place again himself, and come hurrying back to me.

Or he would notice that his brother, who suffered from attacks of epilepsy, was about to "have a spell." He would run to him, tap him on the cheeks, tweak the end of his nose, blow on his face and call, "Scipione, Scipione," till he brought the boy around again.

There's no telling what fun I should have gotten out of such a man, had I not had that blessed skeleton in my closet—a fact, this latter, of which Papiano became aware, or at least suspicious, in no time at all.

Mr. Meis this, Mr. Meis that! A veritable bombard-

ment of adulation—yet always underneath the compliment, a line out to catch me and get me to say something definite about myself. I came to feel that every remark, every question of his, however commonplace, however obvious, concealed a trap for me; and I meantime would be anxious not to show the least reserve in order not to increase his mistrust; though, I must say, my annoyance at the servile, ceremonious, harrassing, inquisition he held me subject to prevented me from concealing my real feelings very well.

My resentment came also from two secret causes within. One was this: I had never done anything wrong; I had never harmed a living soul; yet I felt compelled to be ever on my guard, as though I were an outlaw with no title whatever to being left alone. The other, I refused to admit even to myself, and my suppression of it made its action more subtly virulent inside me. I kept cursing in my own mind:

"You ass! But pack up your things and clear out! Why put up with this infernal bore?"

It was of no avail. I did not go away. I could not go away—and I knew that I never would.

The interior struggle I fought to refuse recognition of my love for Adriana, prevented me, as a logical corollary to this insincerity with myself, from considering the consequences of my abnormal status in life in connection with that passion. So I just kept on from day to day, puzzled, perplexed, restless, irritated, fidgeting, in constant uneasiness, though preserving a smiling countenance toward other people.

On all that I had overheard that night while hiding behind my window shutters, I had secured no further light. It seemed that the bad impression Papiano had

received of me, from whatever the Caporale woman told him, had vanished with our first introduction. He tormented me with his devious questioning, it is true; but certainly with no intention, disguised or otherwise, to get me out of the house. On the contrary, he was doing everything he could to keep me as a roomer. Well, what was he up to, then? Since his return Adriana had become morose and gloomy again, treating me with a cold, distant aloofness as she had at first. In the presence of others, at least, Silvia Caporale always addressed Papiano with "lei" the formal word for "you"; but he, irrepressible rogue, thee'd her and thou'd her blatantly, even calling her Rhea (*rea*) Silvia once—for a good pun. I could not grasp the true significance of his manner toward the woman—a mixture of raillery and intimacy at the same time. That drunken red-nosed slattern certainly commanded little respect from the indecorum of the life she led; but, on the other hand, she should not have been treated that way by a man wholly unrelated to her.

One evening (there was a full moon and the night was as bright as day) I perceived her from my window sitting sad and solitary on the balcony. She, Adriana, and I had met there rarely since Papiano came, and never with the same pleasure as formerly; for he inevitably joined us and did the talking for us all. With the idea that I might perhaps learn something interesting from her by catching her in that mood of dejected relaxation, I decided to have a talk with her.

As usual in going out of my room I found Papiano's brother coiled on the same trunk in the hallway. Did he spend his time there in that uncomfortable position

of his own choice, or had he been stationed there to watch me?

Signorina Caporale was weeping, when I arrived on the balcony. She refused to talk at first, on the excuse of a severe headache. But shortly she seemed to make up her mind all of a sudden, and turning straight toward me and holding out a hand, she asked:

"Are you a real friend of mine?"

"If you are kind enough to grant me such a privilege," I answered with a bow.

"Oh no, no fine language, please, Mr. Meis! I need a friend, a real friend, just at this moment. . . . You ought to understand; for you are alone in the world as I am. . . . Of course, you are a man, and it's different for a man. . . . Oh, if you only knew, Mr. Meis, if you only knew . . . !"

Wherewith she bit at the handkerchief she was holding in one hand, to keep from weeping; and that remedy not proving successful she began tearing it angrily into strips:

"A woman, an ugly woman, and an old woman!" she cried. "That's what I am! Three misfortunes that can never be helped. Why do I go on living, anyway?"

"Is it as bad as all that?" I asked, to say something. "Don't be so downhearted, signorina. Why do you talk that way?"

"Because . . ." she exclaimed, but then she stopped, unable, or at least unwilling, to finish her sentence.

"Please tell me," I encouraged. "If a friend can be of any use to you . . ."

She carried the tattered handkerchief to her eyes:

"It would be much better if I could die!" she groaned with a note of such complete dejection that I was deeply

moved. Never, indeed, will I forget the lines of anguish that formed around her thin ill-shaped lips as she said the words, nor the quivering of her chin under its scattering of ugly black hair.

"But I can't even die," she finally resumed. "Oh, no, Mr. Meis, what could you do for me? Nothing! Neither could anybody else. A few kind words perhaps, a little pity! But that's all! I am alone in the world, and I must stay here, to be treated . . . well, you probably have noticed how! And they have no right to, you know! They have no right to! I'm not living on their charity . . ."

And at this point Signorina Caporale told me the story of the six thousand lire, I have already mentioned, and how Papiano got them away from her.

The personal troubles of this woman were interesting enough, in their way; but still this was not just what I had come to find out. Taking advantage, I confess, of the abnormal condition she was in—perhaps from a sip of wine too much at dinner—I ventured a leading question:

"But why did you ever risk giving him the money signorina?"

"Why?" and she clenched her fists. "Because I wanted to show him! . . . Two mean things, one meaner than the other! I wanted him to understand that I knew what he really wanted from me! And his wife was still living, too!"

"Ah, I see . . ."

"And just imagine," the woman continued, gathering spirit in her narrative. "Poor Rita . . ."

"That was his wife's name?"

"Yes, Rita—Adriana's sister. . . . In bed for two

whole years, hanging between life and death. . . . You can imagine whether I . . . but anyway, they all know how I acted; and Adriana knows, too; that's why she is so fond of me . . . really fond of me, poor thing! And what is the fix I have been left in? . . . Why, I've even had to give up my piano which for me was . . . well, everything, you understand. . . . Oh, not just because I'm a teacher! My piano was my whole life. I could write music, as a girl, there at the Conservatory. And I did a number of songs afterwards, when I had finished my course. Well, as long as I had my piano, I could still compose . . . oh, not for publication of course—just for myself. . . . I would sit down and improvise . . . and sometimes I would get so worked up. . . . I don't know what it was . . . it was as though something were coming right out of my soul . . . and I couldn't stand it: I would almost faint away. . . . I became part of my instrument and it of me, so that I could hardly feel my fingers touching the keys. It was the weeping and the sorrowing of my own heart. . . . Why, judge for yourself. . . . One evening a crowd gathered under my windows—I was alone at home with mother there on the second floor where we lived—and the people clapped and cheered and cheered and clapped . . . I was afraid!"

"But, my dear signorina," I said comfortingly, "if a piano is all you need, couldn't we hire one? . . . I should enjoy hearing you play, ever so much . . . and if you will allow me . . ."

"No!" she interrupted. "What could I do with it now? It's all over with me. . . . I can bang off a popular song in the cabarets, perhaps; but that's all . . ."

"Did Papiano never promise to make good the money

you gave him?" I ventured again, edging back toward the subject that most concerned me.

"That man?" the woman exclaimed scornfully. "Who would ever expect him to? I never asked it back from him, to begin with. But now he is talking of doing so. Oh yes, now he'll give it all back to me provided . . . provided I help him. . . . That's it! He wants me to help him—no one will do but me! Do you know, he actually had the face to make the proposition to me in so many words! . . ."

"What proposition? How could you help him?"

"With another dirty trick he has in mind. Don't you understand . . . I am sure you can guess . . ."

"Adri . . . Miss Paleari . . ." I gasped.

"Exactly! I am to bring her around to it, you see! I . . ."

"Around to marrying him?"

"What else? And do you know why? Because the poor girl has, or at least ought to have, a dowry of some fifteen thousand lire—the money from her sister's dowry, that is, which he is legally bound to return to Anselmo Paleari at once—because Rita died without children, you see. I don't know what he's done with it; but he has asked for a year's time to pay it back. So now he is hoping that . . . sh-h-h—here comes Adriana . . ."

Taciturn, distracted, more distant and shy than ever, Adriana came out to join us, bowing to me with a slight nod of recognition, and putting her arm around Miss Caporale's waist. After what I had just learned, I felt a flash of anger at seeing her so submissive and compliant to the odious intrigues of the rascal who was plotting her capture; but I had little time to indulge such a wholesome emotion. Before long Papiano's

brother, moving more like a ghost than like a real man, stole out upon the balcony.

"Here he is!" said Silvia, nudging Adriana.

The little girl half-closed her eyes, and drew up her lips in a bitter smile. Then with an angry toss of her head, she withdrew into the house:

"Good night, Mr. Meis," said she; "I must be going!"

"He's watching her," the Caporale woman whispered, with a significant nod in the boy's direction.

"But what is Miss Paleari afraid of?" I could not help asking in my increasing irritation and disgust. "Doesn't she understand that such conduct on her part gives him a stronger hold over her? May I be frank, signorina? I have the greatest envy and admiration for people who are interested in life and play the game with gusto. If I had to choose between the bully and the person who lets himself be bullied without protest,—why, I would side with the bully!"

The Caporale woman noted the feeling with which I spoke, and she answered with just a trace of irony in her voice:

"Well, why don't you start a rebellion?"

"I?"

"Yes, you, you!" she challenged, openly now, looking me sarcastically in the eye:

"What have I to do with all this?" I replied. "I could protest in only one way: by giving up my room and clearing out!"

"Well," the woman rejoined with a shrewd thrust, "that may be the one thing Adriana doesn't want!"

"She doesn't want me to go away?"

The piano teacher twirled her bedraggled handker-

chief round and round in the air, finally winding it up into a ball around her thumb:

"You never can tell!"

I shrugged my shoulders:

"Well, I . . . I'm going to dinner!" I exclaimed; and I left her standing there, without another word.

To strike while the iron was hot, I stopped that very evening, on going along the hallway, in front of the trunk where Scipione Papiano was coiled in his usual style:

"Excuse me," I began, "can't you find some other place to sit? You're in my way just here!"

The boy looked blankly up at me out of his sleepy eyes, but did not seem at all embarrassed;

"Did you hear what I said?" I continued, shaking him by the arm.

He sat there as stolid as a stone. However, a door opened at the end of the corridor. It was Adriana.

"I wonder, signorina," I now said; "can't you get this poor boy to understand that he might choose some other place to sit?"

"He's not well," said Adriana, trying to soften the situation.

"All the more reason for moving," I countered. "The air is not so very good here; and besides . . . sitting on a trunk . . .! Shall I speak to your brother about it?"

"No, no," Adriana protested hurriedly, "I'll see him about it myself!"

"You understand, I am sure," I added. "I'm not so much of a king yet that I need a watchman to guard my door."

From that moment I lost all control over myself: I began to compromise Adriana's timidity overtly, forcing her hand, as it were, but at any rate, closing my eyes to consequences, recklessly surrendering to the feelings in possession of me. The poor dear little housemother! At first she did not know what to make of it, vacillating apparently between hope and fear. She could not trust me wholly as yet, divining that anger more than anything else was at the bottom of my changed behaviour; but at the same time she realized that her fear hitherto had been based on the secret and almost unconscious hope of not losing me. And now my sudden self-assertion, strengthening the hope, prevented her from surrendering quite to the fear. This delicate and affecting perplexity of hers, this modest reserve on her part, kept me from clarifying issues entirely in my own mind, and brought me to persist more tenaciously still in the combat Papiano and I had now tacitly agreed to wage with one another.

I had expected the fellow to confront me the very next morning after my brush with his brother and have done with his usual compliments and ceremony. But no! He gave ground. He at once removed his brother from the outpost in front of my door, and even went so far as to twit Adriana about her embarrassment in my presence:

"You mustn't judge my little sister too harshly, Mr. Meis. She's as shy as a little nun when strangers are around!"

This unexpected retreat and the brazen unconcern of the man quite disconcerted me. What was he driving at, anyway?

One evening I saw him come home in company with an individual who entered the house striking his cane noisily on the floor, as though he were walking in felt shoes and were anxious to be sure his feet were working well.

"Where is this dear relative of mine,"—*Dôva ca l'è stô me car parent*—he began vociferating in a high-pitched Piedmontese dialect—not bothering to remove from his head the large broad-brimmed hat that was pressed down over his watery half-opened eyes, nor from his mouth a short-stemmed pipe over which he seemed bent on broiling a nose redder than that of Miss Silvia Caporale. *"Dôva ca l' è stô me car parent?"*

"Here he is," said Papiano waving a hand in my direction; then, turning toward me, he said: "A surprise for you, Signor Adriano! Let me introduce Mr. Francesco Meis, a relative of yours, from Turin!"

"A relative of mine?" I gasped in bewilderment.

The man, evidently half drunk, closed his eyes entirely now, raised a paw much as a bear might do and stood there waiting for me to grasp it.

I did not disturb the pose for some seconds, meantime looking at him fixedly.

"What's the joke you are trying on me now?" I then inquired.

"A joke? Why a joke?" answered Papiano. "Mr. Francesco Meis assured me you and he . . ."

"Cousins," the visitor volunteered, to help out: *"Cusin! Tut i Meis i sôma parent!* All the Meis's belong to the same family!"

"I am sorry I have never had the pleasure of setting eyes on you before!" I protested.

"That's one on you," the man exclaimed. *"Oh ma côsta ca l'è bela!* That's the very reason why I came to have a look at you!"

"Meis? From Turin?" I pretended to ponder. "But I am not from Turin!"

"How is that?" Papiano interrupted. "Didn't I understand you to say that you lived in Turin till you were ten years old?"

"Why of course," the stranger interposed, apparently offended that so much fuss was being made over a point so simple: *"Cusin, cusin!* What's-his-name here . . ."

"Papiano—Terenzio Papiano! . . ."

"Yes—Terenziano! Terenziano told me your father went to America! Well, what's that mean? It means you are the son of old Uncle Toni, *barba Antôni,* yes sir! He went to America. And so we are cousins! *Nui sôma cusin!"*

"But my father's name was Paolo!"

"Antôni!"

"No, Paolo! Paolo! Paolo! Do you think you know more about that than I do?"

The man shrugged his shoulders and stretched the corners of his mouth into a broad smile, rubbing meantime a four days' growth of gray beard on his chin:

"I thought it was Antonio. But it may be as you say. I shouldn't dare contradict you—for I never knew him myself!"

The poor fellow, having the advantage over me that I well knew, might have stood his ground; but he seemed to be content so long as we were cousins. His father, he further explained, was a Francesco like himself, and a brother of the Antonio—or rather of the Paolo—who had gone off to America from Turin at a time when he,

Francesco Meis Second, was still a boy—*ancor masnà* —of seven. Having lived all his life away from home—a little job in the government service—he was not very well acquainted with the old folks whether on his father's or his mother's side; but we were cousins—of that there could be no doubt.

"But you must have known grandpa, surely!" I decided mischievously to ask.

Yes, he had known grandpa, he could not remember whether at Pavia or at Piacenza.

"Oh, really? What did he look like?"

"Look like? Why . . . er . . . I can't quite say. That was some thirty years ago. *A sôn passa trant' ani!*"

The fellow did not seem to be acting in bad faith. I took him rather for a poor devil who was drowning his soul in wine in order to escape some of the worries of poverty and loneliness. He stood there with head lowered and eyes closed, approving all the things I said to corner him. I am sure that I could have told him we had been to school together and that I had given him a thrashing once; and he would still have remembered, so long as I admitted that we were cousins. On that point he refused to compromise. So cousins we remained.

But suddenly, on looking at Papiano and catching an expression of gloating on his face, I lost my desire for further jesting. I bade the drunken man good-afternoon with a "*Caro parente!*" fixing my eyes upon Papiano's with the idea of convincing him that I was not to be trifled with by such as he.

"Will you be so good," I asked, "as to tell me where you unearthed that crazy idiot?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," the rascal answered (I must admit he was a man of extraordinary resourcefulness). "I can see that I was not altogether happy in my . . ."

"On the contrary you are always most happy in your guesses!" I exclaimed.

"No, I mean . . . I was mistaken in thinking you might be glad to see him. But believe me, it was such a strange coincidence. You see, here is how it happened. I had to go to the tax office this morning, on a matter of business for the Marquis, my employer. While I was there I suddenly heard some one calling: 'Mr. Meis! Mr. Meis!' I turned around, of course, thinking it was you, and supposing you were there on some matter where my influence might be of use to you—it is always at your disposal, you understand. But no! It was this 'crazy idiot,' as you so well call him. And I, out of idle curiosity, went up to him and asked him if his name were really Meis, and where he came from, since I had the honor of knowing a Mr. Meis who was a guest in my home! Well, he said that you were a cousin of his and insisted on coming home with me to make your acquaintance. There you have the whole story."

"All this happened at the Revenue office?"

"Yes. The man works there—assistant collector, or something!"

Could I believe this cock-and-bull yarn? I made up my mind to investigate it.

And it proved to be true!

But it was equally true that Papiano, with all his suspicions of me, was meeting my frontal attack upon his secret manœuvres in his home, by retreating, evading, slipping around me, to delve into my past and finally assail me from the rear. Knowing the man as I

did, I had every reason to fear that with his keen scent he could not long fail to find a clue; and that, once on the right track, he would never depart from it till he stood on the bank of the Miragno mill-flume, with the bloated body of the late Mattia Pascal in front of him.

Imagine then my terror when, a few days later as I was reading in my room, there came to my ears from the corridor a voice—a voice from the other world, but one still vivid in my memory.

"Perhaps I thank God, *segnore,* that I rid myself of her!"

The Spaniard! My Spaniard! The pudgy little man in the big beard who had hooked on to me at Monte Carlo and followed me to Nice, where we had quarrelled because I would not play partners with him as he wanted. God of Heaven! The trail at last! That devil of a Papiano had finally found it!

I jumped to my feet, grasping the edge of the table in order not to collapse in the sudden anguished horror that seized upon my heart. Stupified, my knees a-tremble, I stood there and listened, determined to run away the moment Papiano and the Spaniard (it was he—there was no mistaking his voice and his broken Spanish-Italian) got through the hallway. But . . . run away? In the first place, supposing Papiano, on coming in, had asked the servant whether I were at home? How would he interpret my flight, in that case? And, in the second place. . . . "Let's think this all the way out now." . . . They knew my name was Adriano Meis. But what else could the Spaniard know about me? He had seen me at Monte Carlo. Well, had I ever told him there that my name was Mattia Pascal? Perhaps! I could not remember. . . .

I happened to be standing in front of my mirror, as though some one had set me just there on purpose. I looked at myself in the glass. Ah yes, that crooked eye of mine! That blessed cock-eye! By that he would recognize me! But how on earth had Papiano ever gotten back to my adventure in Monte Carlo? That was what surprised me more than anything else. What could I do about it, meantime? Nothing, obviously! I should have to wait for what was going to happen to happen.

And nothing happened.

Though I did not recover from my fright even after Papiano, on the evening of that very day, in explaining to me the mystery of that incomprehensible and terrifying visit, showed me clearly that he was not really on my track at all, but that Fortune simply, after the many extraordinary turns with which she had favored me, had now done me another in suddenly setting across my path again that Spaniard who very probably had forgotten that I ever existed.

From what Papiano told me of the fellow, I saw that I could hardly have missed him at Monte Carlo, since he was a gambler by profession. But how strange that I should be meeting him now in Rome, or rather that, coming to Rome, I should have hit upon one of the very houses to which he had entrance! Certainly, if I had had nothing to be afraid of, the curious coincidence would not have impressed me so strongly; how often, in fact, do we come unexpectedly upon people whom we have met elsewhere by merest chance? In any event, he had, or thought he had, very good reasons for coming to Rome and to Papiano's house. The fault was mine, or at least of that chain of circumstances which

had caused me to shave off my beard and change my name!

Some twenty years earlier, the Marquis Giglio d'Auletta—the man whom Papiano was serving as private secretary—had given his only daughter in marriage to Don Antonio Pantogada, an attaché of the Spanish embassy to the Holy See. Not long after the wedding, Pantogada, along with some members of the Roman aristocracy, had been arrested in a raid made by the police one night upon a gambling house in the city. This had occasioned his recall to Madrid, where he had committed the other indiscretions, perhaps worse than this one, which had finally brought about his dismissal from the diplomatic service of his country. From that moment, the Marquis d'Auletta had not had a moment's rest from constant demands for money made upon him by his profligate son-in-law. Pantogada's wife had died four years before, leaving a daughter about fifteen years old, whom the Marquis had taken to live with him, knowing only too well the kind of environment her father would have provided for her. Pantogada had at first refused to give the girl up, but finally he had yielded under pressure of money to pay his debts. Now he was continually raising the question again, and, in fact, had come to Rome for the purpose of taking his daughter—in other words, a round sum of money—away with him. He could be sure that the Marquis would make any sacrifice rather than see his dear grand-child, Pepita, fall into her father's hands.

Papiano rose to heights of holy wrath in his denunciation of such a cowardly piece of blackmail. And I am sure he was quite sincere in it all. He had one of those ingenious contrivances for a conscience which permitted

him to howl, in all honesty, at the evil others do, while still without the least discomfort allowing him to work an almost similar game upon his own father-in-law, Paleari.

However, on this occasion, the Marquis Giglio was holding out. It was evident that Pantogada would be detained in Rome for some time and hence come frequently to visit Terenzio Papiano (with whom he got on famously). How could I help meeting him sooner or later? What could I do?

Again I consulted my looking-glass. And I saw in it the face of the late Mattia Pascal, peering at me with his crooked eye from the surface of the Miragno mill-flume, and addressing me as follows:

"What a mess you are in, Adriano Meis! Be honest, now! Tell the truth! You are afraid of Terenzio Papiano, and you would like to put the blame on me—on me again—just because when I was in Nice one day I had a little squabble with a Spaniard. Well, I was right, wasn't I, as you very well know. And do you think you can get out of it by obliterating the last trace of me from your face? Do so, my dear Mr. Meis! Follow the advice of Miss Silvia Caporale! Call in Doctor Ambrosini and have your eye put in place again. . . . Then . . . well . . . then you'll see! . . ."

XIII

The Red Lantern

FORTY days in the dark!

Successful, the operation; oh, I should say so: a great success! Though the eye, perhaps, would be a wee wee bit bigger than the other!

Meantime, forty days in the dark, in my room!

I had occasion to find out for myself now that when a man is in pain he acquires a very individual notion of good and evil: of the good, that is, which people ought to do to him, and to which he thinks he has a right, as though suffering entitled him to compensation; and of the evil which he can do to others, as though a privilege for doing so derived from that same suffering. With the result that he accuses them for the good they fail to do to him as is their duty; and excuses himself for the wrong he does to them as is his right.

After a week or so of that black confinement, my desire, the need I felt, for being somehow comforted increased to exasperation. I did realize, to be sure, that I was in a strange house and that therefore I should be grateful for the solicitous care my hosts took of me. But they did not seem to me sufficient, these attentions; rather they grated on my nerves, as though they were paid me out of spite. Of course they did! Because I understood from whom they came. Through them

Adriana meant me to know that she was with me there, in her thoughts, all day long. A jolly consolation that, I must say! What good were her bally thoughts, if mine, all the meanwhile, were ever out in anguished search of her, here and there through the house! She alone could comfort me; and it was her duty to! She must have understood better than anybody else how dull it all was, how lonesome I must be feeling, how I longed to see her, or at least be conscious of her presence near me!

To my nervous irritation was added a sullen rage on my learning that Pantogada had left Rome almost immediately. Would I ever have consented to such torture —forty livelong days in worse than jail!—if I had known that idiot were going away so soon, bless his soul!

To cheer me up, old Anselmo Paleari tried to show me, by a long disquisition, that the dark was quite imaginary on my part:

"Imaginary?" I stormed furiously; "Imaginary? Glad you think so!"

"Now wait just a moment; and I'll make clear just what I mean!"

Perhaps to prepare me for a spiritualistic séance which, to take my mind off my troubles, he seemed inclined to hold in my room, he expounded a very unusual system of metaphysics which he had thought out—all by himself—a sort of lanternosophy, one might have called it.

Every now and then, as he talked, the old man would stop to ask me:

"Are you asleep, Mr. Meis!"

More than once I was tempted to answer:

"Yes, thank heaven!"

But since I could not fail to recognize that his intentions were of the best—the idea of helping me pass my time more pleasantly—I would answer:

"No, my dear Paleari, I am listening! Most instructive! Please continue!"

And he continued.

"We," said he, "for our misfortune, are not like trees, let us say, which live without consciousness and to which the earth, the sunshine, the air, the rain, the wind, the snow, are nothing which the tree itself is not —but just something harmful or beneficial merely, if you understand me. We humans, on coming into the world, find we have one sorry privilege—the privilege of feeling ourselves live, with all the fine illusions that follow as a consequence, the illusion, in particular, that this inner experience we have of a life forever varied and changing—changing according to time, circumstance, or fortuity—is a reality outside ourselves.

"Whereas this sense we have of life is a lantern, as it were, which each of us carries within himself. Now this lantern, with its faint light, reveals to us that we are lost, astray, on the face of the earth, showing us the good and the evil on every hand. Why not? Our lanterns cast about us a greater or a lesser area of light, beyond which all is blank darkness. Now this fearful gloom would not exist were our lanterns not there to make us conscious of it; though we must believe it is a real darkness, so long as our lights are aglow within us. Well now, imagine that our lamps are blown out; this fictitious darkness will engulf us entirely, will it not? After our cloudy day of illusion, perpetual night! But is it really perpetual night? Or is it simply that

we have fallen into the arms of Essence which has broken down the insubstantial forms of our Reason?—Are you asleep, Mr. Meis?"

"Please go on, my dear Paleari! I was never more awake! I can almost see those lanterns you are talking about!"

"Very well then. . . . But you have one eye out of commission, remember! We had better not get too deeply involved in philosophy. Supposing we amuse ourselves just following these wandering fire-flies—our various lanterns, that is—as they stray this way and that in the darkness of human destiny. In the first place they are of many different colors—according to the kind of glass which Illusion—a great dealer in colored spectacles—supplies us to view things through. It's an idea of mine, however, that in certain eras of history, Mr. Meis, as in certain periods of our individual lives, certain colors tend to predominate, eh? At a given epoch in history, certain common prejudices, certain common ways of thinking, seem to prevail among men, which color the globes of those—I will say—searchlights, beacons, rather than lanterns, which the great abstractions constitute—Truth, Virtue, Beauty, Honor, and so on. Don't you think, for instance, that the beacon of Pagan Virtue was colored red? Whereas that of Christian Virtue must have been violet—something gloomy, depressing, I mean to suggest. The flame of the common idea is fed, nourished, kept alive, by the oil of collective agreement on certain fundamental things; but let this unanimity, this consensus, be broken down—well, the reflector, the globe, the abstract term, remains, I grant you; but the flame inside, the flame of the idea, begins to sputter and spit—and this happens

in all the so-called periods of transition. Not infrequently in history there come sudden violent gusts, certain world-wide brain-storms, that extinguish all the great beacons of Truth at the same moment! What a time! What a time! In the darkness everywhere prevailing now, our individual lanterns go scampering around this way and that in the greatest confusion—this one forward, this one backward, this one round and round in a circle;—they collide, they dodge each other, they gather together in groups of ten, twenty, or a hundred; but there is no guide to the certain road to verity: they cannot agree; they quarrel, and argue, and dispute, and finally scatter again in all directions. Panic! Chaos! Anarchy! Bewilderment!

"Now, it seems to me, Mr. Meis, that we ourselves are now living in one of those periods of transition. Doubt, confusion, perplexity on every hand. All the great beacons darkened! All the landmarks gone! Whom shall we follow? Which way shall we go? Backwards, perhaps? Shall we gather about the little lamps we find hanging to the gravestones of our illustrious dead? Do you remember what Niccolò Tommaseo said in one of his poems—a good poet was Tommaseo, in spite of his dictionary—that the flame in his lantern was not big enough perhaps to set the world on fire, but that it still might serve for greater men than he to light their wicks from? Which is all very well, provided you've got plenty of oil in your own lantern! But many people haven't, Mr. Meis! Many people haven't! So what do they do?

"Well, certain of them go to the churches, don't they? to get enough oil to last their time out—poor old men and poor old women, for the most part, whom life has

played false and who grope their way forward in the gloom of existence, their faith lighting their humble pathway like a votive candle. How carefully they shield their feeble lantern from the blasts of final disillusionment, hoping and praying their wicks will not die out till they reach their journey's end. Closing their ears to the blasphemous clamor of the world about them, they keep their eyes fixed on the light in their hands, reassuring themselves that it will be bright enough for God to notice them.

"The faint but unfaltering glow of some of these humble lanterns arouses a certain anguished envy in many of us, Mr. Meis; though others, who think they are chosen favorites of the Zeus Thunderer of Science and are sure that the Almighty has equipped their automobiles with the most modern electric headlights, have a disdainful pity for them. For my part, I say nothing positive, Mr. Meis—I just ask a little question: supposing all this darkness, this great engulfing mystery in which the philosophers of the ages have speculated in vain and which Science, though it refuses to investigate it, does not preclude, were, after all, only a delusion, a fiction of our minds, a fancy we are somehow unable to brighten with gay colors? Supposing we could convince ourselves that all this mystery should prove not to exist at all outside of us but only in us—and as a necessary compensation for our having that lantern I have been talking about, that sense of life, I mean, which it is our unhappy privilege to possess? Supposing, in a word, that there were no such thing as this death which fills us with such terror, that death should prove to be not the extinction of life but a gust of wind, merely, which blows out the light in our lantern, extin-

guishes this dolorous, painful, terrifying sense of life we have—terrifying, because it is limited, narrowed, fenced in by the circle of fictitious darkness that begins just where the light from our lantern stops. We think of ourselves as fireflies astray in this darkness, desperately casting about us tiny circles of radiance which are powerless to dispel the gloom, and which are, as it were, our prisons cutting us off from the universal, the eternal life to which we shall some day be allowed to return. Whereas, in point of fact, we are part of that greater life already, and always shall be, but henceforth without, let us hope, that feeling of exile and exclusion which torments us so. No, Mr. Meis, the fence about us is wholly illusory, something proportionate to the strength of the light, of the individuality, within us. I don't know whether you will like the notion—but the fact is that we have always lived and always shall live at one with the Universe. Right now, in our present bodily forms, we participate in all the manifestations of Universal Life. We are not aware of this—it does not force itself upon our attention; because, unfortunately, this puny weepy little lantern of ours reveals to us only the amount that it can actually illuminate. But worse than that, it does not show things as they really are; on the contrary, it colors them in its own blessed way; so that now our hair stands on end at certain prospects which, were our bodily forms somewhat different, would only amuse us! Amuse us, I mean, because they would all seem so simple then that we should laugh at the strange terrors they once had for us! . . ."

Since Mr. Anselmo Paleari had such scant regard for the little colored lanterns we each have in us, I could

not help wondering just why he was so anxious to light another—with a red globe—right there in my sick-room. Weren't the two we had between us making trouble enough already?

I decided to put the question to him.

"*Similia similibus* . . . " he answered. "One lantern corrects the other. Besides, the red lantern I am going to light goes out at a certain point, you know! . . ."

"But do you really think," I ventured further, "that this device of yours is the best means for discovering something?"

"What scientists call 'light,' " rejoined Anselmo, not in the least disturbed, "may give us a very inadequate and deceptive notion of the thing they call 'life'; but for what is beyond the latter it not only does not help but, believe me, actually hinders. There are a few charlatans of science, with intellects as insignificant as their impulses are perverse, who claim, for their own conveniences, that such experiments as those I perform with my red lantern are an insult to Science and to Nature herself. Heaven help us, Mr. Meis! Such nonsense! No, we are trying simply to discover other laws, other forces, evidences of another life, in this same Nature—the very same Nature, mark me!—seeking by methods supplementing those normally used, to go beyond the very narrow comprehension of things that our frail senses ordinarily furnish. I ask you—don't these same scientists demand the right environment, the proper conditions, for their experiments? Can a photographer do without his dark chamber? Well then! . . . Besides, there are all sorts of ways to test results and check up on trickery; . . ."

But Anselmo, as I had occasion to observe some evenings later, did not see fit to use any of these—probably because his experiments were just a private family affair. Could he have the least reason to suspect that Miss Caporale and Papiano were having their fun with him? Besides, why be so particular anyhow? These séances were not for the purpose of convincing him—he was sure already! The best-natured simpleton who ever lived, he never once dreamed that his son-in-law and the piano teacher had any ulterior motives in attending his meetings. If results were pitiably meagre and petty, he had his theosophy, to write into these the most plausible and portentous significances. Why ask for anything better? Since he had no medium handy, we had no right to expect that the Beings dwelling on the higher, the Mental Plane, could be brought down to communicate with us. We should be mighty glad to get the halting and imperfect manifestions of the dead who were still nearest our own lowly sphere—on the Astral Plane, that is.

Who could refute him in such an argument?[1]

* * * * *

I knew that Adriana had always refused to take part in these "experiments." Ever since I had been shut up there in my room she had come in but rarely (and invariably when someone else was present) to ask me how I was getting along. Such inquiries seemed to be the mere politeness which in fact they were. She knew very well how I was getting along! I even thought I

[1] Note of Don Eligio Pelegrinotto: "'Faith,' wrote Albertus Florentinus Magister, 'is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.'"

could detect a note of mischievous irony in her voice; since she, of course, could not have the least idea of my real reasons for suddenly deciding on this operation —an operation, which, as she must have concluded, was a matter of vanity on my part, an attempt to look more handsome, or at least less ugly, by having my face remodeled along the lines suggested by Miss Silvia Caporale!

"I'm getting along fine, signorina," I would answer. "I can't see a blessed thing!"

"But you'll see better, much better, later on," Papiano would then observe.

In the dark there I would clench a fist and shake it in his direction. How I should have liked to drive it home! He was surely saying such things to make me lose the little good humor I still managed to preserve. He could not possibly help noticing the dislike I had for his visits—I showed it in every way, yawning, gaping, grunting, strictly avoiding all amenities. But there he stuck, just the same, coming in to see me every evening (without Adriana, of course—leave that to him!), and sitting there for hour after hour, boring me past endurance with his endless chatter. His voice coming out at me in the darkness made me twist and turn on my chair and sink my nails into my palms. I could have strangled him at certain moments. And could he not sense all this? Could he not feel it? I thought he could; for just at such times his voice would soften and take on its most caressing and soothing tones!

We always have to hold someone responsible for our trials and tribulations. Papiano, so I decided, was doing his best to get me out of the house; and had the voice of common sense been able to make itself heard in my

mind, for that I should have been heartily grateful to him. But how could I listen to common sense, if common sense was talking to me through the mouth of such a fellow—who, in my judgment was wrong, patently wrong, despicably wrong? He wanted to get rid of me, I concluded in my rage, in order to fleece Paleari at leisure and encompass Adriana's ruin. That was all his interminable prattle meant to me! Was it possible that any decent counsel could come from the lips of a man like Papiano?

Though perhaps all this was the way I chose to excuse myself for not mastering emotions which came in reality, neither from my dark confinement nor even from the weariness I felt at Papiano's constant talking and talking!

He talked—oh, he talked of Pepita Pantogada, evening after evening.

Though there could have been nothing in my style of living to suggest such a thing, he had taken it into his head that I was a very wealthy man; and now, to get my mind off Adriana, he was perhaps flirting with the notion of interesting me in the granddaughter of the Marquis Giglio d'Auletta. He described her to me as a very strict and very uppish young lady, brimful of intelligence and determination, energetic in her ways, outspoken and decisive in conversation; a beautiful girl, besides—oh, as for that, a prize-winner—dark hair, slender (a jolly armful, nevertheless), bubbling with life, two dazzling black eyes, and lips—well, let's say nothing about her lips. Nor about the dowry, either—nothing to speak of, the dowry, beyond the whole estate of the Marquis! Who, for his part, would be very glad to have a husband in sight for the girl, not only to be

well rid of Pantogada, but because he didn't get along so very well with Pepita herself! A quiet, easy-going sort of fellow was the Marquis, interested in the things and the people of the old days; while Pepita—she was strong, assertive, full of vitality and spirit.

Didn't Papiano understand that the more he praised Pepita to me, the greater my dislike for her became, even before I had set eyes upon her? I would meet her some evening soon, he said, because he would eventually persuade her to attend one of the séances; and he would introduce me to the Marquis also; for the Marquis was very keen to make my acquaintance, after all that he, Papiano, had said of me. Unfortunately the Marquis never went out anywhere, had renounced society, in fact; and of spiritualistic meetings in particular he could not approve because of his religious views.

"How is that?" I asked. "He lets his granddaughter go to places where he would not go himself?"

"But he knows who it is she's going with!" Papiano exclaimed proudly.

That was enough for me. Why should Adriana, out of religious scruples, refuse to do something which Pepita could do with the full consent of a pious Clerical grandparent? I seized upon the argument and tried to persuade her to be present at the first sitting.

She had come to see me with her father, the evening before the séance.

"It's the same old story," Anselmo sighed, on hearing my proposal. "Religion, Mr. Meis, behaves just like Science when it comes to this question—pricking up its donkey ears and rearing on its hind legs. And yet, as I have explained to my daughter a hundred times, our experiments conflict with neither the one nor the other;

in fact, as far as religion is concerned, they demonstrate one of the truths fundamental to religion."

"But supposing I should be afraid?" Adriana objected.

"Afraid of what?" snapped the father. "Of being convinced?"

"Or of the dark?" I added. "We are all going to be here, signorina. Will you be the only one to miss the party?"

"But I . . ." answered Adriana, hard pressed, "I . . . well, I don't take any stock in it, there . . . I don't believe in it, I can't believe in it; and . . . well, never mind . . . !"

She was unable to explain further; but from the tone of her voice and her hesitation, I was certain that something besides scruples of faith was keeping Adriana from the séance. The fear she alleged as an excuse might have causes which Anselmo did not suspect! Or was it simply humiliation at the miserable spectacle her father offered in letting himself be so stupidly taken in by Papiano and Silvia Caporale?

I did not have the heart to insist further; but Adriana seemed to understand intuitively the disappointment which her refusal occasioned me. She dropped an "However" . . . which I caught on the wing:

"Ah, splendid! So you'll come, then!"

"Perhaps just for once—tomorrow," she yielded, with a laugh.

It was late in the afternoon, on the following day, when Papiano came to prepare the terrain. He brought in a small square table of rough unvarnished pine, without drawers; a guitar; a dog collar with bells, and a few other articles. Removing the furniture from one

corner of my room, he stretched a string from moulding to moulding, and from the string he hung a sheet of white cloth. This work was done, I need not say, by the light of the red lantern, and to the accompaniment, as also I need not say, of incessant gabbling.

"This sheet is for . . . well, it's the accumulator,—let's call it that—of this mysterious energy. You just watch it, Mr. Meis; and you'll see it shake and tremble, swelling out now and then like a sail, and lighting up with a strange unearthly glow. Oh yes! We never get any real 'materializations'; but lights—plenty of lights. You'll see for yourself, if Miss Caporale is in her usual form this evening. She's in touch with the spirit of an old school-mate of hers at the Conservatory. He died of consumption—bad business, consumption—at the age of eighteen. . . . Came from . . . I forget just where—Basel, in Switzerland, I believe it was; but he lived here in Rome a long time with his family. A man of promise, a real genius—nipped in the bud! At least, so Silvia says. You know, she was in communication with Max . . . the name was Max . . . wait, what was it? . . . Max Oliz . . . yes, that's it . . . Oliz or something of the sort . . . even before she realized she had any gifts as a medium. According to her story, she would sit down at a piano . . . and his spirit would take possession of her; . . . and she would play and play . . . improvising, understand . . . till she fainted dead away. Why, one evening, a crowd of people gathered under the window, and clapped and cheered and cheered and clapped . . ."

"And Miss Caporale was afraid . . . ," I added, placidly.

"Oh, so you know then!" exclaimed Papiano, stopping short.

"Yes, she told me about it. So I am to conclude that the applause was for Mr. Max's music played through the young lady?"

"That's the idea! Pity we haven't a piano in the house. We have to do what we can with the guitar—just the suggestion of a movement—a note or two, you see. It's pretty hard on Max, I can tell you. Sometimes he gets all worked up, and the way he pulls at the strings! . . . But, you wait till this evening, and you can hear for yourself. . . . There, I guess we're about ready now . . ."

"But, would you mind, Mr. Papiano," I decided to ask, before he got away; "I was wondering . . . do you take all this seriously? You really believe in it . . ."

"Why, it's this way, Mr. Meis," said he, as though he had been expecting the question, "I can't say I believe exactly. . . . Fact is, I just don't see through it all . . ."

"Too dark, I suppose! . . ."

"Oh no, not that. . . . The phenomena, the manifestations, themselves, are real, there's no denying that. . . . And here in our own house, we can't suspect each other's good faith . . ."

"Why not?"

"What do you mean, 'why not'?"

"Why, it's very easy to deceive yourself, especially when you're anxious to believe something . . ."

"Well, I'm not so anxious, you know . . . on the contrary, if anything! My father-in-law, who makes a

study of such things . . . yes, he believes in it . . . but with me you see . . . well, I just haven't the time . . . let alone the interest. What with those blessed Bourbons of the Marquis, that keep me up to my neck in work. . . . Oh, I spend an evening this way, once in a while. . . . But my honest opinion is that so long as the Good Lord lets us live, we can know nothing really about death. . . . So why bother? . . . Let's get the best out of living, is what I say, Mr. Meis. So there you have how I feel about it. Now I'll just drop around to the *via dei Pontefici* and get Miss Pantogada . . . and we're ready, eh?"

When he came back, a half hour or more later, he seemed quite annoyed: along with Pepita and her governess, a certain Spanish painter put in an appearance, who was introduced to me, without much cordiality, as Manuel Bernaldez, a friend of the Giglio's. He spoke Italian perfectly; but there was no way to make him recognize the "s" on the end of my name. When he came to that harmless consonant, he seemed to halt as if it were going to burn his tongue:

"Adriano *Mei,*" he repeated several times, in a manner that struck me as too familiar.

"Adriano *Tui,*" I felt like answering!

The ladies entered the room: Pepita, the governess, Silvia Caporale, and—Adriana.

"What, you here too?" asked Papiano, with ill-concealed irritation.

A second slip in his calculations! I could see from the way Papiano had welcomed Bernaldez that the old Marquis could have known nothing of the painter's presence at this meeting, and that some little intrigue with Pepita was at the bottom of it. But the great

Terenzio was not to be discouraged by so little: in forming the mystic circle about the table, he put Adriana next to himself and the Pantogada girl next to me.

Did I like that? Not at all! Nor Pepita either. In fact, she voiced her dissatisfaction instantly in a language exactly like her father's:

"*Gracie,* Segnor Terencio! I prefer a place between Segnor Palcari and my governess!"

In the dim light shed by the red lantern, it was barely possible to distinguish outlines in the room; so I could not be sure exactly how far the portrait which Papiano had sketched of Pepita Pantogada corresponded to the truth. Certainly her manner, the tone of her voice, her immediate rebellion against anything she didn't like, harmonized perfectly with the impression I had formed of her from his description. Her disdainful refusal to take the place assigned her by the master of ceremonies was unquestionably disrespectful toward me; but far from being displeased, I was actually overjoyed.

"Quite right," exclaimed Papiano. "Very well, let's have it this way: Signora Candida next to Mr. Meis; then you, signorina, between Signora Candida and my father-in-law; then the rest of us as we are. Will that do?"

No, it didn't do at all: neither for me, nor for Silvia Caporale, nor for Adriana, nor, as was soon apparent, for Pepita herself; because she managed eventually to find the place she wanted in a new circle arranged by the inventive spirit of Max Oliz. For the moment I found myself next to a mere ghost of a woman who had a kind of steeple on her head—Was it a hat? Was it a wig? Was it the way she fixed her hair? If not,

what was it? At any rate from underneath that towering pile, one long sigh came following on another, each ending in a stifled word of protest. No one had thought of introducing me to Signora Candida. Now we had to hold hands in keeping the mystic chain intact! Her sense of propriety was shocked, poor thing! That was the reason for the sighs and protests! How cold her fingers were!

My right hand was clutching the left of Silvia Caporale, who was sitting at what might be called the head of the table, with her back against the white sheet. Papiano held her other hand. Next to him came Adriana, and then the painter. Anselmo sat at the foot of the table opposite Miss Caporale.

Papiano was the first to speak:

"We ought to begin by explaining to Mr. Meis and Miss Pantogada the . . . what do you call it?"

"The tiptological code!" proffered old Paleari.

"I need to know it too!" said Signora Candida, not to be overlooked, and squirming on her chair.

"Of course, to Signora Candida also!"

"Well," old Anselmo began. "it's this way: two taps mean 'yes.'"

"Taps?" asked Pepita nervously. "What taps?"

"Why, taps!" replied Anselmo. "Either knocks on the table, the chairs, and so forth, or touches on the person!"

"Oh, no-o-o-o-o!" shivered the Spanish girl, jumping up from her place at the table. "I don't want any touches. Who's going to touch me?"

"Why Max, the spirit, signorina!" said Papiano. "I told you, on the way over! They won't hurt you! Don't be afraid."

"Only *tictological* touches!" added the governess, with a superior air.

"As I was saying," Anselmo resumed: "two taps: 'yes'; three taps: 'no'; four: 'dark'; five: 'speak'; six: 'light'. . . . That will be enough for the present. So now let us concentrate, ladies and gentlemen."

The room fell silent. We concentrated.

XIV

Max Turns a Trick

UNEASINESS? No, nothing of the kind; but a keen curiosity, and a curious dread lest Papiano should be on the verge of a humiliating failure! I might have gloated over such a prospect; but I didn't. Who can escape a chill of mortification on witnessing a comedy badly played by actors who do not know their parts?

"One thing or the other," I speculated: "Either he is deeper than I thought, or he is walking blindly into his own trap. In his anxiety to keep Adriana for himself, he has made the mistake of leaving Bernaldez and Pepita, Adriana and me, dissatisfied and therefore in a position to catch him at his game without any motive for calling it amusing or worth our time. Most likely Adriana will be the one to find him out; she is nearest to him, and is suspicious already. She will be on her guard. She came here only to be with me. I imagine she is already asking herself why she consents to aid and abet a farce which is not only stupid in itself but irreverent to religion and discreditable to all who take part in it. Bernaldez and Pepita must be feeling the same way about it. How is it a man as shrewd as Papiano can't understand that—once he failed to bring me and the Pantogada girl together. Is he so sure of himself as all that? How is he going to save his face?"

Busied with all these reflections, I had quite forgotten

Silvia Caporale, who now suddenly began to speak as though she were in the first stages of her trance.

"The chain . . ." said she. "the chain . . . it must be altered!"

"Have we got Max already?" asked dear old Anselmo concernedly.

The woman allowed some time to elapse:

"Yes," she finally answered, in a dreamy, hollow voice. "He says there are too many of us here, this evening . . ."

"That's true," exclaimed Papiano, "but still I think we ought to be able to manage . . ."

"Hush!" whispered Paleari. "Let's hear what Max says!"

"The chain!" Miss Caporale resumed. "The chain . . . ! He finds it out of balance. Here, on this side" (and she raised my hand in hers) "there are two women next to each other. He says that Mr. Paleari should take the place of Miss Pantogada and vice versa . . . !"

"Easy to fix," cried Anselmo, rising from his chair. "Here, signorina, won't you have my chair?"

This time Pepita did not protest: she could now hold hands with her painter.

"Next," added the 'medium,' "Signora Candida might . . ."

Papiano interrupted:

"I have it—in Adriana's place, eh? The same thing had occurred to me! Let's try it that way!"

The moment I found Adriana's hand in mine, I squeezed it till it hurt. On the other side I felt a significant pressure from Miss Caporale's fingers, as though asking me:

"Is that better?"

I returned her clasp with enthusiasm, shaking her hand to signify more or less clearly:

"Anything you wish, now!"

"Silence!" suggested Anselmo in a solemn voice.

And who had spoken? One, two, three, four! The table! Four taps!

"Darkness!"

I was sure I had heard nothing!

But, the moment the lantern was extinguished, something happened which suddenly upset all my calculations. Miss Caporale uttered a shrill blood-curdling scream which brought us all up, standing in our places.

"Light! Light!"

What had taken place? As Bernaldez scratched a match, we could see that Miss Caporale's nose and mouth were bleeding. She had received a tremendous blow in the face!

Pepita and Signora Candida shrank back from the table. Papiano too got up to light the red lantern again. Adriana loosened her hand from mine. Bernaldez stood at his chair, the burnt match in his fingers, smiling in astonishment and incredulity. Old Anselmo was muttering in utter consternation:

"So he struck her? As hard as that? What can it mean? What can it mean?"

In one way I was as puzzled as he. Why had he given her that blow? So that change in the mystic circle had not been prearranged between them? The piano teacher had rebelled against Papiano—with these results? Well, what next?

Miss Caporale had pushed her chair back from the table, and stood there pressing her handkerchief to her

bleeding lips. She was refusing to go on with the séance. And Pepita Pantogada was chattering in her quaint Italo-Spanish:

"*Gracie, segnori, gracie! Acquí se dano cachetas!* Thanks, thanks, this is too rough for me!"

"But no, please!" exclaimed Paleari. "Why, ladies and gentlemen, this is the most amazing occurrence in the history of spiritualism! We must get to the bottom of it. We must ask him to explain!"

"Ask Max?" I queried.

"Max, of course!" said he. "Why Silvia, do you suppose you misunderstood him in rearranging the chain?"

"I am sure she did, I'm sure she did!" said Bernaldez, laughing.

"What do you think, Mr. Meis?" asked Paleari of me, not liking Bernaldez's attitude at all.

"Why, I should think that was a good guess," I evaded.

But Silvia Caporale kept shaking her head with decision.

"So you say no," Paleari resumed. "Well, how do you account for it? Max losing his head! It's beyond me! What do you say, Terenzio?"

Terenzio, secure there in the faint light from the red lantern, was not saying anything. He just shrugged his shoulders.

"Please, Miss Caporale." I now ventured. "Suppose we do as Mr. Paleari suggests. Let's ask Max all about it; and then if he proves too frisky to work with tonight, we'll call it all off. You agree, Mr. Papiano?"

"Certainly," he answered. "Ask him anything you want! I'm willing!"

"But I'm not—in this condition!" said the Caporale woman sharply, turning frankly upon him.

"Why put it up to me?" said Papiano. "If you want to stop . . ."

"Yes, let's!" ventured Adriana.

But old Anselmo raised his voice in ridicule:

" 'Yes, let's! Did you ever see such a stupid! Say, I'm ashamed of you, Adriana! Well . . . now, Silvia, look, I leave it to you. . . . You have been communicating with Max all these years, and you know very well that this is the first time he ever. . . . Oh, I say, it would be a shame to spoil it . . . too bad he hurt you so, but the phenomena were beginning to develop this evening with unusual energy . . ."

"Even too much energy!" tittered Bernaldez with a laugh that proved contagious.

"But please," I added in the same spirit, "if there are to be any more punches I hope they'll miss this eye of mine! . . ."

"*E mio también!*" chirped Miss Pepita.

"Back to the table then," ordered Papiano resolutely. "Let's follow Mr. Meis's suggestion, and ask an explanation. If things get too exciting, we'll stop. To your seats, ladies!"

And he blew out the lantern.

This time I found Adriana's hand cold and trembling. Respectful of her state of mind, I did not clutch her fingers with the same gay fervor, but pressed them gently and firmly to express a mood of earnest tranquillity. It was probable that Papiano had repented of his burst of temper and would change his tack; in any event we could rely upon a breathing space before Max became interested in Adriana or me. "If he tries any-

thing of the kind on this girl," I said to myself, "it will be all over before he knows it!"

Anselmo was by this time in conversation with Max whom he addressed as naturally as though he were talking to a living person present in the room:

"Are you with us, Max?"

Two barely audible taps on the table: he was.

"And how is this, Max?" the old man asked in a tone of mild reproach. "You've always been so kind and courteous hitherto! Why were you so rough with poor Miss Caporale? Are you willing to tell us?"

The table moved this way and that, for a second or more; then—three solid raps in the middle of it! No! Max would not discuss the question!

"Well, we won't insist!" Anselmo continued. "I suppose you're put out over something, eh? Yes! I can see you're not in a happy frame of mind. I know you, Max, understand! I know you! But perhaps you'll be willing to say whether you like the chain arranged as it is?"

Paleari had hardly finished the question when I felt two light quick touches, as though from the tip of a finger, in the center of my forehead.

"Yes!" I called, declaring the "manifestation," and squeezing Adriana's hand.

I must confess that this "tiptological" touch gave me, at the moment, an uncanny shiver. I was sure that had I been able to raise my hand at once I would have caught Papiano's; but at the same time, I had not been expecting such a thing, and the lightness and precision of the taps amazed me. But meantime, why had Papiano picked me out for this revelation of his tolerance? Was he trying to make me feel easier in my

mind, or was it rather a provocation and a challenge:—"I'll show you whether I like it!"?

"That's nice of you, Max!" Anselmo encouraged; and I, annotating mentally: "Yes, mighty nice of you . . . but if you go one step too far . . . !"

"Now," the old man began again, "you would make us all happy if you would give some sign of your good will toward us!"

Five taps on the table: talk!

"What does that mean?" asked Signora Candida nervously.

"It means we must talk!" Papiano exclaimed quietly.

And Pepita:

"Talk? To whom I talk?"

"To anybody—the person next to you, for example!"

"Loud?"

"Out loud!" volunteered Anselmo. "This means, Mr. Meis, that Max is working up something interesting for us. Perhaps he will show a light or something. So talk, talk!"

As for talking, I had, through my finger tips, been carrying on a long, tender and yet impulsive conversation with Adriana and now, frankly, there was not a thought in my brain. A thrilling intoxication had come over me as I twined her fingers around mine, noting with mad delight the anxiety she betrayed to express her own feelings with a reserve in keeping with the timid gentle candor of her innocence. But now, while our hands were continuing this intense communion, I suddenly became aware of something that was rubbing against the rung between the rear legs of my chair.

A creepy sensation ran over me. Papiano could not

possibly reach that far with his toes, let alone the obstacles the front of the chair would have given him. Had he risen from the table and gone around behind me? But in such a case, Signora Candida, unless she were a complete fool, would have announced the breaking of the chain. Before giving warning of the "manifestation" I wanted to understand it myself; but then I thought that since I had consented to the séance only to be near Adriana, it was only fair play to follow the rules. Without delay, and to avoid irritating Papiano unnecessarily, I declared what I was hearing.

"Really!" exclaimed Papiano from his place, in an astonishment which I thought was sincere.

And Miss Caporale evinced just as much surprise.

"A rubbing?" asked old Anselmo, with the deepest concern. "What is it like? What is it like?"

"Yes, a rubbing!" I answered almost angrily. "And it's still there! It's as though . . . an animal . . . a dog . . . were scratching himself against my chair."

A loud burst of laughter greeted this guess of mine.

"Why, it's Minerva, it's Minerva!" cried Pepita Pantogada.

"And who is Minerva?" I asked in some mortification.

"Why, my naughty, naughty little doggie!" she continued, almost in convulsions. *"La viechia mia, Segnore, che se grata asì soto tute le sedie!* She scratches that way every time she gets near a chair! *Con permisso! Con permisso!"*

The chain was broken. Bernaldez lighted a match, while Pepita came and fished Minerva out from under my chair to cuddle her in her arms.

"Now I understand why Max was so out of humor

this evening," old Anselmo commented with some heat. "There has been a bit too much frivolity, if I may say so!"

* * * * *

Nor, except possibly for Anselmo, was there much less on succeeding evenings, so far as spiritualism was concerned, that is.

There is no telling all the tricks that Max performed there in the dark. The table writhed, twisted, creaked, tapping and tapping, now lightly, now noisily. There were taps on the seats of our chairs, on the furniture here and there about the room. You could hear the rasping of finger nails on wood, and the swish of garments in the air. Strange phosphorescent lights would flash and go wandering off through the air, like will 'o the wisps astray. The curtain would bulge and swell, brightening at times with a weird supernatural glow. A small smoking-stand went cavorting around the room, finally leaping over our heads and coming to rest on the table in front of us. The guitar seemed to have grown wings; for it took flight from the chest on which it lay and hung in the air above us, all its strings vibrating. But I thought that Max showed his musical talents best with the bells on the dog collar, which at one point jumped and buckled itself around Miss Caporale's neck. Old Anselmo interpreted that as a very witty demonstration of affection on Max's part; though the lady herself did not seem to relish the joke at all.

Evidently Scipione, Papiano's brother, had come on the scene under cover of the dark and was doing all these things on detailed instructions from Terenzio. The

young fellow was really an epileptic; but he was not so much of a dunce as his brother and even himself wanted people to think. I suppose by long practice at the same tricks he felt quite at home in the dark. To tell the truth, I never went to the trouble to find out exactly how well he executed the hoaxes he rehearsed beforehand with Papiano and the Caporale woman. For the four of us—Bernaldez and Pepita, Adriana and I —were satisfied so long as he kept Anselmo and the governess interested; and that he seemed to be doing marvelously, though neither of them, really, was very hard to please. Old Anselmo just bubbled over with joy, chortling and gurgling like some child at a puppet show. His comments, indeed, sometimes gave me a most uncomfortable feeling of mortification, not only because it was painful to see a man, of his intelligence after all, evince such extremes of gullibility, but because Adriana made me understand more than once that it hurt her conscience to be owing her own joy to her father's making a fool of himself.

This scruple came to our minds occasionally to interrupt our blissfulness; and it was the only thing to disturb us. Nevertheless, knowing Papiano as I did, I should have been on my mettle: I should have suspected that if he consented to leave Adriana to me, and, contrary to my guess, never allowed Max to interfere with us but rather made the "spirit" play our game, he must be having some other scheme in mind. I was so completely carried away, however, by the delights of my love-making in the security of that darkened room, that I am sure the idea that anything might be wrong never once occurred to me.

"No!" screamed Pepita at a certain point.

And Anselmo:

"Speak up, signorina! What was it? What did you feel?"

Bernaldez also urged the girl to speak.

"Why," she said, "a touch, here, on my cheek!"

"Fingers?" asked Paleari. "A light one, I'll warrant—cold, furtive, but light, very light! Oh, I can tell you, Max has a fine way with women! What do you say, Max? Won't you just pat the lady again?"

"O-oo-oo-oo," screamed Pepita, but laughing this time. *"Aquì està! Aquì està!"*

"What do you mean?" asked Anselmo, not understanding the Spanish words.

"He's doing it again . . . he's tickling me!"

"And now a kiss, eh, Max?" proposed Paleari.

"No, no, no!" screamed Pepita.

But a loud sonorous smack echoed from her cheek.

Almost involuntarily, I raised Adriana's hand to my lips; and that caress quite maddened me. I bent over and sought her lips.

Thus it was that the first kiss, a long, a silent, an impassioned kiss was exchanged between us.

And now, immediately—what was it that took place? For some moments, in a bewilderment of shame and confusion, I was too much flurried to grasp the cause of the sudden disorder. Had I been detected spooning?

Every one was shouting and screaming. One match was struck, and then a second! A candle was lighted—the candle inside the red lantern.

All the people present had jumped to their feet. Why? Why?

And now, there, in the lighted room, in plain view of us all, a blow, a heavy blow, as from the fist of an

invisible giant, landed squarely in the middle of the table!

We all paled with fright, Papiano and the Caporale woman more terrified than anyone else.

"Scipione! Scipione!" called Terenzio.

There the boy was! He had fallen to the floor in one of his attacks, and was gasping strangely for breath.

"Keep your seats!" cried Anselmo. "He's in the trance, too! Oh, look, look! The table! The table! It's moving! A levitation! A real levitation! Good for you, Max! Good for you!"

And the table, in fact, without anyone's touching it, rose four inches or more and fell back, with a thud, heavily, to the floor.

Silvia Caporale, pale as death, trembling, terror-stricken, shrank against me, hiding her face in my coat. Pepita and the governess ran shrieking from the room. Paleari was beside himself:

"Sit down, sit down! For heaven's sake, people! Don't break the chain! We're coming to the best of it. Max! Max!"

"Max, nonsense!" exclaimed Papiano, recovering finally from the consternation that had frozen him in his tracks to the floor, running over to his brother to bring him to.

All thought of the kiss I had stolen had been momentarily driven from my mind by the strange and unexplainable manifestation that I had witnessed. If, as Paleari contended, the mysterious power, that had worked there in that lighted room under my very eyes, came from an invisible spirit, that spirit was surely not Max: the expression of the faces of Papiano and Silvia Caporale were good proof of that. Max was a hoax of

their invention. Who had acted then? Who had struck that terrific blow on the table?

All the things that I had read in old Paleari's books now came crowding in a tumult into my mind. With a shiver I thought of the poor unknown man who had drowned himself back there in the Miragno Flume, a man whom I had robbed of the tears of his people and of the sorrow of the strangers who found him.

"It might be he," I said to myself. "Supposing he had come here to seek me out, and get his revenge by revealing everything! . . ."

Paleari, meantime, the only one of us neither surprised nor alarmed by what had occurred, stood there unable to understand how such a commonplace phenomenon as the levitation of a table had been able to affect us so deeply after all the other marvels we had seen. The mere fact that the room was lighted made little difference to him. What puzzled him rather was the presence in the room of the boy, Scipione, who he had supposed was in bed.

"I am surprised because ordinarily he takes no interest in our researches. I imagine our secret gatherings roused his curiosity, so he crept in to see what we were doing, and then—slam bang! Because it is well established, Mr. Meis, that the more unusual manifestations of mediumism derive from epileptic, cataleptic and hysterical neurosis. Max gets the energy he uses from all of us—and it takes quite a little to produce the phenomena we have seen. There is no doubt on this point. Don't you feel as though you had lost something?"

"Not as yet, to tell the truth!" I answered.

Till dawn almost, I tossed uneasily on my bed, thinking of the unfortunate man who lay buried in the

Miragno cemetery under my name. Who was he? Where had he come from? Why had he killed himself? Perhaps he had hoped his unhappy end would become known—as an expiation, a restitution, in a sense! And I had profited by it all!

More than once, I confess, as I lay there in the dark, a chill of cold terror ran up and down my body. It had all taken place right there, in my room—the séance, that blow on the table, the levitation. Others had seen as I had! Was he responsible? Might he not be standing there, invisible, at my bedside? I would hold my breath and listen to catch any sound in the room. Finally I fell into an uneasy slumber made horrible by frightful dreams.

When morning came, I drew my curtains and opened my windows wide to the full sunlight.

XV

I and My Shadow

MANY a time, on awaking in the heart of the night (can such a cruel thing as night have a heart?) I have experienced, in the darkness and in the silence, a curious surprise, a strange perplexity, on suddenly thinking of something I have done during the daytime without noticing; and on such occasions I have wondered whether the shapes, the colors, the sounds of things that surround us in the varied whirl of life may not somehow determine our actions.

I am sure they do. Are we not, as old Anselmo says, in relation with the universe? It would be interesting to know how many idiotic things this blessed universe impels us to do, for which we hold our much overworked consciences responsible; while these, poor things, are really the victims of exterior forces, blinded by a light that is not of themselves. And on the other hand, how many schemes we form during the night time, how many decisions we make, how many projects we conceive, only to have their vanity and foolishness become apparent with the return of day! Day is one thing and night is another! So we perhaps may be one thing by day and another by night—though little enough we amount to in either case, I am afraid!

I know that on letting the light into my room after

forty days of confinement, I did not feel the least joy. The memory of what I had been doing during all those days took the radiance out of the sunshine. All the reasons, arguments, excuses, which had had their weight and convincingness in the dark either lost these when the curtains were drawn aside and the windows opened, or seemed to acquire wholly different values. Vainly the poor I, which had been shut in so long behind darkened shutters and had striven in every way to alleviate the tedium of its imprisonment, trailed along after the other I that had let in the bright sun and, severe, frowning, aggressive, was turning its face to the new day. Vainly did it seek to banish all irksome thoughts, noting, for example, in front of the mirror, the success of my operation, the attractiveness of the long beard that had come out again, and a certain fineness, a certain delicacy in the pallor that had settled on my features.

"You ass! What have you done! What have you done!"

What had I done? Nothing, really, when you come down to it! I had made love to a girl.

In the dark—was I responsible for the dark?—I had not been aware of difficulties, and had lost the reserve which I had so rigidly prescribed for myself. Papiano had tried to keep Adriana away from me. Silvia Caporale had given her back, assigning her to a seat at my side (poor Silvia getting a punch in the face for her kindness)! I was a sick man, in pain; and naturally, I thought—as any other wretch (say man, if you want to) would have thought under the circumstances—that I had a right to some compensation; and so, since the said compensation was sitting in a chair at my elbow, I had accepted it. While old Anselmo was messing

around with ghosts and dead people, I had preferred the life at my side—a life ready to bloom forth into joy under a kiss of love. Well, Manuel Bernaldez had kissed his Pepita in the dark, so I accordingly . . . ooph! . . . I sank into an armchair, my face in my hands. I could feel my lips quiver at the memory of that kiss. Adriana! Adriana! What hopes might I have aroused in her heart by it? Engaged, eh? And now, with the curtains drawn and the windows opened —mish-mash and good appetite! A pleasant time for all!

I sat there in the chair I don't know how long, thinking, thinking, with my eyes wide open into space, drawing myself up now and then in an angry shudder as though to free myself from the torture within me. At last I could see in all its rawness the humbug in my illusion, the cheat that underlay what, in the first intoxication of my freedom, I had called the greatest of good fortunes.

In the beginning this freedom had seemed to me boundless, without restriction; then I had discovered that it had a limit—in the modest funds at my disposal. Next I had perceived that, liberty though it be, it was a liberty which exacted a fearful price, condemning me to solitude and lonesomeness, precluding all companionship. So I had approached people to escape from that, determined, nevertheless, to avoid any relationships, even the slightest, that might fetter me. Well, what had that determination amounted to? Life—life that was no longer for me—had respliced the bonds I had broken with it; life, in all its irresistible insurgence had, despite my wariness and caution, sucked me back into its vortex! I could not close my eyes to that fact

now. I could no longer refuse, on one fatuous pretext or another, with one pitiable excuse or another, to recognize my feelings for Adriana, nor attenuate the consequence of my intentions, my words, my acts: I had said too much without saying anything—just by pressing her hand in mine, by twining her fingers around my fingers; and a kiss, a kiss at last, had consecrated our love beyond recall. How make my promise good? Could I marry Adriana? But those two women back home, Romilda and the widow Pescatore, had thrown me — not themselves — into the mill-flume at "The Coops." Romilda was free enough—yes! But I wasn't. I had set out to play the part of a dead man, thinking I might live another life, become an entirely different person. And I could be indeed another man — but on what condition? On condition that I refrain from doing anything, that I keep clear of activity of any kind! A fine sort of man, that! The shadow of a man! That's it—a ghost in flesh and blood! And what a life! So long as I had been content to keep shut up within myself and be a mere spectator of the life others were living, so long was it possible to maintain, after a fashion, the illusion that I was really living another life. But let me venture forth even so little as to snatch a kiss from two pretty lips . . . !

I was repelled, in horror, as though I had kissed Adriana with the lips of a corpse, a corpse who could never come to life again for her.

Oh, if Adriana . . . oh no! no! . . . if Adriana were to understand my strange predicament . . . Adriana? Impossible! Not that pure, innocent child! . . . And supposing . . . supposing love were strong enough in her—stronger than any social or moral scruple. . . . Oh,

poor Adriana! Could I take her with me into the empty world to which my lot confined me, make her the wife of a man who could never dare declare and prove himself alive? What then? What could I do?

Two knocks on my door brought me from my chair with a bound. It was she, Adriana.

Though I tried with a supreme effort to master my emotions, I could not suppress on my face all traces of the tumult within me. She too was somewhat constrained, from a natural reserve of modesty which did not allow her to show all the pleasure she felt at seeing me quite well again, with light in my room once more, and—happy. . . . Yet, no, not happy? Why not? She looked up at me furtively. Then she blushed. Finally she handed me a sealed envelope.

"Here is something—for you!"

"A letter?"

"I don't think so. It's probably Doctor Ambrosini's bill. The messenger is waiting to see if there's an answer."

Her voice trembled. She smiled.

"Right away!" I answered; but a wave of tenderness swept over me as I divined that she had seized the pretext of the note to come herself and hear from me one word that would encourage the leaping hope she had conceived. A deep anguished pity gripped me—pity for her, pity for myself, a cruel pity that impelled me irresistibly to caress her, to find some little balm for my own agony which could seek comfort only in her who was the cause of it. Knowing very well that I would be still further compromised, I was unable to restrain myself. I held out both my hands. Trustful, humble, her face aglow, she slowly raised her own and placed

them in mine. I drew her little blond head to my breast and gently stroked her hair.

"Poor Adriana!" I said.

"Why?" she asked, under my caress. "Are we not happy?"

"Yes!"

"Why 'poor Adriana' then?"

At that moment I almost lost control of myself. I was tempted to rebel, to reveal everything, to answer: "Why? Listen, little girl: I love you, and I cannot, I must not, love you. But if you are willing . . ."

"If you are willing!" What could that tiny defenceless creature decide for herself in such a matter? I pressed her little head hard against me, realizing what unspeakable cruelty it would be to hurl her from the supreme joy in which, unsuspecting, she felt herself at that moment of exaltation, into the abyss of desperation where I was writhing in torment.

"Because," I actually said, releasing her, "because I know of many things that might make you unhappy . . . !"

A sharp pain was visible on her face as she looked up. I had abruptly ended my tender caress—and I had avoided the intimate word for "you." Surely she had not been expecting such aloofness. She gazed at me for a moment. Then, noting my distress, she asked fearfully:

"You know things? . . . About yourself . . . or about us . . . the house here?"

I replied with a gesture that meant "Here! Here!"; but it was really to escape the violent impulse that was driving me to full confession.

Had I but yielded then! One great shock would have

come to her; but many others would have been spared her; and I should have saved myself from new and more harassing complications. But my sad discovery was still too recent for me to have grasped its full significance. Love and pity outweighed stern resolution in me. I had not the heart to destroy at one blow her hopes and my own life—at least that illusion of living, which, so long as I kept silent, I could still preserve. How odious, how hateful to me the revelation I would have to make: a wife already! Yes, there was no evading it: the moment I should admit I was not Adriano Meis, I would become Mattia Pascal again perforce—Mattia Pascal, dead and buried, but married still! How could I put such a thing into words? Was this not the extreme of persecution that a wife may inflict upon a husband: to get rid of him by the false identification of a corpse, but then to cling to him, to be a perpetual weight upon him in this way, after his death? I could have refused to accept the situation, it is true! I could have gone home and declared myself alive! But who would not have done as I did, in my place? Any man in the fix I was in at that time would have seized such an unexpected, such an unhoped for, such an incredible opportunity to cast off at once a wife, a mother-in-law, a ruinous debt, a sickly, miserable, meaningless existence! Could I have realized at that time that, officially pronounced dead, I would not be free from my wife—that she could marry again, while I could not—that the life which opened ahead of me, free, free, limitlessly, boundlessly free, was only a dream which could never attain more than a superficial realization, was only a vile humiliating slavery to the lies I would be forced to tell, to the pretences I would be forced to make, to

the fear of detection that would relentlessly pursue me, though I had done no wrong?

Adriana recognized that there was little in her home surroundings to make her happy; but now. . . . A mournful smile gathered about her lips and eyes as she stood there looking up at me. . . . Could things that were a source of sorrow to her really be obstacles between her and me?

"Surely not?" that mournful smile and that appealing gaze seemed to say.

"But we must give Doctor Ambrosini his money!" I exclaimed gaily, pretending suddenly to remember that the messenger was waiting in the other room.

I tore open the envelope, and remarked in a light laughing tone:

"Six hundred lire! What do you think of that, Adriana? Signora Nature is playing me one of her usual tricks. Notice now: for years and years I had to go around with a—what shall we say—an unruly, a disobedient eye in my face. Now I have a doctor cut me up and I spend forty days in a dark cell—just because Madame Nature made a mistake, you see. Well, after it's all over, I have to foot the bill! Do you call that square?"

Adriana smiled, with an effort:

"Perhaps Doctor Ambrosini would make a fuss, though, if you told him to send his bill to Mrs. Nature. I'll bet he wants a word of thanks and appreciation into the bargain; because your eye . . ."

"Do you think it's an improvement?"

She tried to look up into my face, but soon turned away, replying faintly:

"Yes, much better!"

"I or the eye?"

"You!"

"I was afraid these whiskers . . ."

"No, why? They are very becoming!"

I could have dug that eye out with my fingers! Lots of good it did me to have it in place again!

"And yet," I said, "perhaps the eye itself was better satisfied to remain as it used to be. It complains a little every now and then! However . . . I'll get over it!"

I stepped toward the cabinet where I kept my money. Adriana turned to go away but I detained her—stupidly; and yet, how could I have foreseen? In all the crises big and little in my life, Fortune, as my story shows, had always stood by me. Well, she did, in this case too—with a vengeance!

As I started to open the cabinet I noticed that the key would not turn in the lock. I pulled gently and the doors swung out: it was open!

"What in the world!" I exclaimed. "Could I have left it this way?"

Noting my sudden commotion, Adriana turned deathly pale. I looked at her.

"Why, signorina," I said, "someone must have been prying into this!"

Things inside the case were topsy-turvy: my bank-notes had been extracted from the leather purse in which I carried them and lay strewn about on the bottom of the cabinet.

Adriana buried her face in her hands, aghast.

Feverishly I gathered up the scattered bills and began to count them:

"Is it possible?" I murmured, on finishing the count, passing my trembling hands over my forehead to wipe the cold sweat away.

Adriana clutched at the edge of my table to keep from falling in a faint. Then she asked in a hollow voice that was not her own:

"Have they robbed you?"

"Why—how can this be! Wait . . . wait!"

I began to count the bills over again, digging my nails furiously into the paper as though violence could bring to light the bank notes that were missing.

"How much?" asked Adriana in a tone that betrayed an inner convulsion of horror and dismay.

"Twelve . . . twelve thousand . . ." I faltered. "There were sixty-five . . . there are now fifty-three. . . . You count them!"

Had I not rushed to catch her, Adriana would have collapsed as under a hammer-blow. However, with a great effort upon herself, she straightened up and, sobbing, choking, tore herself from my arms as I tried to let her down into a chair.

"I shall call papa," she said, pushing toward the door. "I shall call papa!"

"No!" I almost shouted, forcing her back into the chair. "No! Please don't get excited, signorina! You make it harder for me, this way! I won't let you! I won't let you! What have you to do with it? Please, stop crying now! I must look around, make sure; because . . . yes, the cabinet was open; but I cannot, I must not, believe that such a large sum of money has been stolen. . . . Now be good, little girl! Promise?"

Once more, as a last precaution, I counted the money over. . . . Then, though I was absolutely certain that I had placed it all there in the cabinet, I searched my room from floor to ceiling, looking even in places where I should never have hidden such a sum except in a moment of dire insanity. To justify the absurd hunt to

my own mind, I kept trying to emphasize the incredible audacity of the thief; until Adriana, hysterical now, weeping and sobbing, her hands to her face, groaned:

"Oh don't, don't! A thief! A thief! Even a thief! And it was all planned in advance! I heard it . . . in the dark . . . I suspected something . . . but I refused to believe he would go that far . . ."

Papiano! Yes, Papiano! It could be no one but he . . . using his half-witted brother . . . during the "experiments" in the darkened room!

"But I don't understand . . ." Adriana wept again. . . . "I don't understand! How could you ever keep so much money with you—in a cabinet like that—at home?"

I turned toward her and stood silent as in a stupor. How answer that question? Could I tell her that I was obliged, in my circumstances, to keep my money with me, that I did not dare deposit it in any bank or entrust it to any broker—since, in case I should have the least difficulty in withdrawing it, I could never establish my legal identity and ownership?

Not to arouse her suspicions by my embarrassment, I was simply cruel:

"How could I ever have supposed . . .?"

The poor girl was now in a paroxysm of anguish:

"O God! O God! O God!" she wept.

The terror that might properly have assailed the person guilty of the theft now came over me instead, as I thought of possible consequences. Papiano would guess that I could not charge the Spanish painter with the crime, nor old Anselmo, nor Pepita Pantogada, nor Silvia Caporale, nor the spirit of Max Oliz. He would know mighty well that I would accuse him—him and

his brother. Well, knowing that, he had gone ahead just the same, defying me.

What could I do, indeed? Have him arrested? How could I do that? Never, in the world! I could do nothing, nothing, nothing!

The reflection crushed me utterly.

A second discovery, and all in one day! I knew who the thief was, and I could not have him punished. What right had I to the law's protection? I was outside every law. Who was I, please? Nobody! I did not exist, in the eyes of the law! Anybody could pick my pocket and I . . . hush, hush!

But—come to think of it—how could Papiano be sure of just that?

He couldn't!

Well then?

"How did he manage it?" I said, almost to myself. "Where did he ever get the courage?"

Adriana raised her head from her hands, and looked at me in astonishment, as much as to say: "Don't you understand?"

"Yes, I see!" I answered, catching what she meant.

"But you will have him arrested," she exclaimed resolutely, rising to her feet. "I am going to call papa! He will have him arrested!"

Again I was in time to stop her. That would have been the last straw—Adriana, of all people, compelling me to have recourse to the law! I had lost twelve thousand lire—but that was nothing! I had also to fear lest the crime become known. I had also to get down on my knees and beg Adriana not to talk, not, for Heaven's sake, to let anybody know!

But—nonsense! Adriana (I see it all clearly enough

now) could not possibly allow me to be silent and force silence also upon her. She could not accept what must have looked like a generous act on my part, could not for a number of reasons: first, on account of her love for me; then for the good reputation of her house; finally, out of fear and hatred for her brother-in-law.

But at that painful moment, her well-justified rebellion seemed to me just one nuisance too much: angrily, I menaced:

"But you will keep this to yourself, do you hear? You won't say a word to a living soul, do you hear? Do you want to cause a scandal?"

The poor child began to sob again:

"No, no! I don't want to make a scandal! But I'm going to rid my home of that disgraceful rascal!"

"But he'll say he didn't do it!" I persisted. "And then you, and all the rest of us, as suspects, in court! Can't you see that?"

"Well, what of it?" answered Adriana, quivering now with anger. "Let him deny it, let him deny it! But we, you know, have plenty of other things to say against him. Have him arrested, Mr. Meis! Don't be afraid for us! You will be doing us a great service, believe me! You will be paying him back for what he did to my poor sister. . . . You ought to see that you will be doing me a wrong not to report him to the police. If you don't, I will, so there! How can you expect papa and me to live under such a disgrace? No! I won't! I won't! I won't! . . . Besides . . ."

I caught the little girl up in my arms, forgetting all about the money for the moment in my anguish at seeing her suffer so desperately. I promised her that I would do as she said, if only she would dry her tears. How

did it reflect on her and her papa? I knew who was to blame: Papiano had decided my love for her was worth twelve thousand lire. Well, should I show him he was wrong by having him arrested?

"You want him arrested? Well, I'll report him, there, there, little girl! Not on account of the money —but just to get him out of the house . . . yes, yes . . . right away . . . but on one condition, little girl . . . that you wipe away those tears . . . and stop crying that way, eh? . . . Yes, yes. . . . But you must promise . . . promise by all you hold most dear . . . that you'll not mention the theft to a living soul . . . till I've had time to consult a lawyer . . . there! there! . . . and see what all the consequences might be . . . because now . . . we're too excited . . . we might make some mistake. . . . You promise? You promise? By all you hold most dear?"

Adriana took the oath, and with a look, through her tears, that told me what she was swearing by, what it was she held most dear in all the world. Poor, poor Adriana!

When she went out, I stood there in the middle of the room, stunned, vacant, confounded, as though all the world had vanished from around me. How long was it before I came to myself again? And how did I revive? Plain idiocy! Plain idiocy! Only an imbecile could stand there looking at the cabinet, as I was doing. Had the lock been jimmied? No, there was not a trace of violence on the varnish. The door had been opened with a duplicate, while I was keeping my key so carefully in my pocket.

"Don't you feel as though you had lost something?" Paleari had asked me at the end of the last séance.

Twelve thousand lire!

Again the thought of my absolute helplessness, of my absolute nothingness, came over me, flattening me to earth. That I might be robbed, that I could say nothing in such a case, that, indeed, I should have to fear the crime might be discovered quite as much as though I myself were the thief, had not occurred even remotely to my mind.

"Twelve thousand lire! But that's nothing: they could take every cent I have, strip the shirt off my back, and still I . . . hush! hush! What right have I to speak? Question: 'Who are you?' Question: 'Where did you get that money?' Well, never mind the police. . . . This evening, say, I go up to him and I seize him by the collar: 'Here, you miserable scoundrel, just hand back that money you took out of my cabinet!' . . . He raises his voice in holy wrath. He denies. Can you imagine him saying: 'Why yes, here you are, old man! I took it by mistake!'? And that isn't the worst of it. He might even sue me for slander. No . . . hush—the soft pedal! Hah! And I thought I was so lucky when they declared me dead! Well, now I'm really dead! Dead? I'm worse than dead, as old Anselmo reminded me—the dead are through with dying, while I have to die again. Alive as regards the dead, dead as regards the living! What kind of a life can I live, after all? Again alone, all by myself—solitude!"

With a shudder of horror, I buried my face in my hands and sank into a chair.

Ah, were I but a criminal outright! I could reconcile myself to a life like that, getting used to wandering and continual danger, living indeed in constant sus-

pense, without fixed purposes, without definite connections. But I? I could do nothing! But something I had to do! Well, what? Go away, for instance! Yes, but where? And Adriana! What could I do for her? Nothing! Nothing! Yet, how, after what had happened, could I just go away without any explanation? She would attribute my conduct to the theft; but then she would ask: "Why did he choose to protect the thief and punish me?" Oh no, no! Poor Adriana! But since I could not act, how could I hope to save appearances with her? I had to seem illogical and cruel—there was no escape from that! Cruelty, inconsistency, for that matter, were part and parcel of my situation in the world; and I was the first to suffer from them. Even Papiano, the thief, was more coherent and less brutal in committing the theft, than I would have to show myself in forgiving him.

What better logic, in fact? He wanted Adriana, to avoid repaying the dowry of his first wife. I had tried to deprive him of Adriana. Was it not fair, therefore, that I should pay the money to Anselmo?

As logical as Euclid, barring the detail of thievery—a mere detail.

Hardly thievery at all, when you look at it right. For my loss would be more apparent than real. Adriana being the girl she was, Papiano understood that I would make her my wife and not my lover. Well, in that case, I would get my money back in the dowry. My money back, and the dearest sweetest little woman in the world! What more could I ask for?

Oh, I was absolutely sure: if we could only wait, if Adriana could manage to hold her tongue, we would see Papiano paying the money he owed to Anselmo even

before the note fell due. Well, to be sure—I wouldn't get the money because I could never marry Adriana; but she would get it—provided that is, she would follow my advice and keep quiet; and provided I could stay on for some time in the house. A tough job—lots of skill, and the patience of Job! But in the end Adriana could look forward to the return of the dowry.

This conclusion quieted my apprehensions, at least in her regard. As regards myself, alas, I was still faced by all the horror of my discovery—the fallacy in my new life, in comparison with which the loss of twelve thousand lire was nothing—even a blessing, if it proved in the end to help Adriana a little.

For my part, I was cut off now from life forever; I had no conceivable chance of reentering it again. With that bitter sorrow in my heart, with all this terrifying experience of the reality before me, I would leave that house where I had begun to feel at home, where I had found a little rest and quiet. Yes, out upon the roads again, roads leading to nowhere, an aimless, purposeless, unending vagabondage! Fear of being caught again by the tentacles of life would keep me more than ever aloof from men. Alone! Alone! Utterly alone! Morose, diffident, suspicious! The tortures of Tantalus!

I picked up my hat and coat and ran out of the house like mad.

When I came to my senses I found myself on the *Via Flaminia* near the Ponte Molle. Why had I come just there? I looked around. The sun was shining brightly. My eyes chanced to fall upon my shadow, clean cut on the white pavement. I stood contemplating it for a time. Finally I raised my foot to stamp on it. But no, no! I could not. I could not stamp on my own shadow.

Which was more of a shadow, I or my shadow itself? Two shadows!

There, there, on the ground! And anybody could walk on it, grind his heels into my head, into my heart. And I could say nothing, or my shadow either!

"The shadow of a dead man—that's what I am!"

A wagon was approaching. I stood just as I was to see if it were not so: yes, first the horse, one hoof after another; then the two wheels!

"Exactly! Let him have it! Right across the neck! Ah-hah! That's good, you too, eh, doggie? That's right—but your leg a little higher, eh? Just a little higher, eh?"

And I burst into a bitter laugh. The dog scampered off, afraid of me. The teamster turned and looked, wondering what I was laughing at. But I started away, my shadow moving along the ground in front of me. With a mad ferocious delight, I amused myself pushing the shadow under the wheels of carriages, the hoofs of horses, the feet of passersby. At one moment I failed to find it where I had been expecting, and the queer idea came to me that I might have kicked it loose. But I turned around. It was there on the ground behind me, now.

"And if I start running, it will keep up with me to the end!" I mused.

Had I gone crazy? Had I fallen prey to a fixed idea? I pinched my forehead to be sure I was myself. But yes, I was thinking straight, I was thinking soundly! That shadow was the symbol, the spectre of my real life. I was really lying flat on the ground, and everybody could walk on me with impunity. To such depths the late Mattia Pascal had fallen! He lay buried back there in

the cemetery at Miragno. His ghost, his shadow, was walking the streets of Rome!

That shadow had a heart, and it could not love! That shadow had money, and anyone could steal it. That shadow had a head, and the head could think, could think just enough to understand that it was the head of a shadow but not the shadow of a head! Just so, ladies and gentlemen!

How it ached, that head! It ached as though all those wheels and hoofs had really passed over it, pinching, crushing, bruising it. Well, why not lift it out of the gutter for a while?

A street car came along; and I leapt aboard. . . . On my way back to my house.

XVI

Minerva's Picture

QUITE before the door was opened to my ring, I knew that something serious had happened inside: I could hear the voices of Papiano and Paleari away out in the street.

It was the Caporale woman who finally came, pale and in great agitation, to let me in:

"So it's true, is it?" she cried. "Twelve thousand?"

I stopped in my tracks, breathless, dismayed. Scipione Papiano, the half-wit, crossed the entry at just that moment, barefooted, his shoes in his hand, and his coat off. He too was pale and frightened.

I could hear his brother Terenzio vociferating violently:

"Well, call the police, call them, and be damned!"

A flash of bitter anger at Adriana ran through me. In spite of my prohibition, in spite of her promise, she had spoken!

"Who told you that?" I almost shouted at Miss Caporale. "Nothing of the kind! I have found it again!"

The piano teacher looked at me in amazement:

"The money? Found again? Really? Oh, thank God! Thank God!" she exclaimed, raising her arms devoutly; then she ran on ahead of me into the dining room where Papiano and old Anselmo were screaming

at each other at the tops of their voices, while Adriana was weeping and sobbing.

"He's found it! He's found it again!" Silvia called exultantly. "Here is Mr. Meis now! He's gotten his money back!"

"What's that?"

"Back?"

"Really?"

The three of them stood there in utter astonishment. Adriana and her father with flushed faces, however; while Papiano wild-eyed, ashen-pale, seemed staggered at the news.

I eyed him fixedly for a second. I must have been paler than he, and I was quivering from head to toe. He could not meet my gaze. His body seemed to sag at the knees. His brother's coat fell from his grasp. I went close up to him and held out my hand:

"I'm so sorry: excuse me, please—and all the rest of you . . ."

"No!" cried Adriana indignantly; but she pressed her handkerchief to her mouth.

Papiano looked at her and dared not offer me his hand. Again I said:

"I beg your pardon!" And I forced my clasp upon him, for the satisfaction of sensing the tremor that was vibrating through his whole body. His hand was as limp as a rag. He had the look of a corpse, especially about his deadened glassy eyes.

"I'm extremely sorry," I added, "for all the trouble, for the very serious trouble I have caused you—unintentionally, you may be sure . . ."

"Not at all," Paleari stammered. "Not at all . . . or rather . . . yes . . . if I may . . . you see . . . it

was something that really . . . yes . . . it couldn't be so . . . there! Delighted, Mr. Meis, my congratulations . . . so glad you got it back . . . your money . . . because . . ."

Papiano passed his two hands over his perspiring brow, ran his fingers through his hair, took a deep breath and then, turning his back to us, stood looking through the French doors out upon the balcony.

"I am like the man in the story," I began again, smiling. "I was looking for the donkey and I was on its back all the time: I had the twelve thousand lire in my pocket book! The joke is on me!"

Adriana could not stand this:

"But you looked in your pocket book, and everywhere else, in my presence; why, there, in the cabinet . . ."

"Yes, signorina," I interrupted, severely and firmly; "but I couldn't have looked carefully enough, since, now, as you see, I have found the money . . . I ask your pardon particularly, signorina; for this oversight on my part must have cost you more suffering than any of the others. I hope however that now . . ."

"No! No! No!" cried Adriana, breaking into sobs and dashing out of the room with Silvia Caporale pursuing her.

"I don't understand!" exclaimed Paleari in amazement.

Papiano turned angrily toward us:

"Well, anyhow, I'm going to clear out—today. . . . It would seem that now there is no further need of . . . of . . ."

He gagged, as if his breath were giving out. Finally he decided to address me, though he did not have the effrontery to look me in the eye:

"I . . . I couldn't . . . believe me . . . I couldn't even say no . . . when they . . . right here. . . . Why, I went right after my brother who . . . irresponsible . . . sick as he is . . . who could be sure? . . . He might have . . . I dragged him in here by the collar. . . . A terrible scene . . . I made him take off all his clothes . . . to search him . . . even under his shirt . . . and in his shoes and stockings. . . . And he . . . oh!"

At this point his voice choked again and his eyes filled with tears. Then he added in a broken, husky tone:

"Well, they were able to see . . . but, of course. . . . since you. . . . But after what has taken place, I am going away . . . !"

"No, you're not!" I said. "By no means! On my account? No, you must stay here! I'm the one who's going to move, if anybody is!"

"Why, the idea, Mr. Meis!" said old Anselmo in sincere protest.

Even Papiano, struggling with the tears he was trying to suppress, made a negative gesture. At last he was able to explain:

"I was . . . I was going away anyhow! In fact, all this happened because I . . . without meaning anything in the world . . . announced that I was intending to leave, on account of my brother, who, really, should not be kept at home any longer. . . Fact is . . . the Marquis gave me . . . see for yourself—I have it here—a letter for the director of a sanatorium in Naples. . . . I have to go to Naples anyway, for some more documents the Marquis wants. . . . And my sister-in-law, who holds you . . . quite properly . . . in high, in the very highest, esteem . . . jumps up and says no one is to leave

the house . . . that every one of us should remain indoors . . . because you . . . well . . . because you had discovered. . . . That to me! Her own brother, you might say! . . . Yes sir, she said it to me. . . . I suppose because I . . . poor, I grant you, but honest after all . . . I am under obligations to pay to my father-in-law, Mr. Paleari here . . . ."

"What in the world are you dreaming of now?" exclaimed Paleari, interrupting.

"No," said Papiano, drawing up haughtily. "It's on my mind! I'm bearing it in mind, don't you worry! And if I go away. . . . Poor, poor Scipione!"

Papiano seemed unable to control his feelings any longer, and burst into tears outright.

Paleari, deeply moved and very much perplexed, did not know what to make of it all:

"Well, what's Scipione got to do with that?"

"My poor little brother!" Papiano continued, with such a ring of sincerity in his voice that even I felt a choke gathering in my throat. I concluded that his emotion was due to an access of remorse on account of his brother, whom he had used in the venture, whom, if I reported the matter to the police, he would have blamed for the theft, and whom he had actually humiliated by the insulting search.

No one understood better than Papiano that I had not recovered the stolen money. My unexpected declaration, coming to save him just when he was thinking himself lost and was about to accuse Scipione (or, according to his premeditated plan, to suggest that the half-wit alone could be responsible for such a thing), had thrown him completely off his pins. He was weeping now, either from an uncontrollable necessity for giving some

vent to his inner strain, or because he felt that he could not face me except in tears. These tears, clearly enough, were an overture of peace to me. He was kneeling in humble surrender at my feet; but on one condition: that I stick to what I had said about finding the money again; for if, profiting by his present abasement, I were to return to my charge, he would rise against me in a fury. Put it this way: he did not know, he was never to know, anything at all about the theft. My generous falsehood was saving only his brother, who, as I should understand, could not be punished anyhow, in view of the boy's mental infirmity. On his side, I should observe, he was pledging himself indirectly but clearly, to repay the Paleari dowry.

All this I read in his tears. But at last, Anselmo's exhortations and my own prevailed upon him to master his agitation. He said he would go to Naples but return the moment he had found a good hospital for his brother, *cashed certain interests he owned in a business he had recently started with a friend,* and copied the papers the Marquis needed.

"By the way," he concluded, turning now to me; "it had quite gone out of my mind. The Marquis requested me to invite you for today, if you are free . . . along with my father-in-law and Adriana . . ."

"Oh, that's a good idea," exclaimed Anselmo, without letting him finish: "Yes, we'll all go! Splendid! We have good excuse for a bit of diversion now. What do you say, Mr. Meis? Shall we go?"

"So far as I am concerned . . ." I said, with a gesture of compliance.

"Well, shall we make it four o'clock then?" Papiano proposed, wiping his eyes for good this time.

I went to my room, my thoughts all on Adriana, who had answered my story about the money by running away from us in tears. Supposing she should come now and demand an explanation? Certainly she could not have believed what I said. What then, could she be thinking? That, in denying the theft, I had intended to punish her for breaking her promise? Why had I done so,—come to think of it? Of course—because the lawyer whom I had gone out to consult before bringing criminal charges, had assured me that she, and everybody else in the house, would be brought under suspicion. She, to be sure, had announced her willingness to face the scandal; but I, obviously, could not allow that—just for the sake of twelve thousand lire! She, accordingly, could interpret such generosity on my part as a sacrifice made out of love for her!

Another humiliating lie forced upon me by my circumstances—a loathsome lie which credited me with an exquisite and delicate act of unselfishness all the finer because in no sense had she requested or desired it! Was this the way I should reason?

Why no! Not at all, not at all! Was I crazy? Following the logic of my necessary and inevitable falsehood, I could reach quite different conclusions. Bosh, this notion of generosity, of sacrifice, of affection! Could I engage the poor child's emotions any further? No, I must suppress, I must strangle my own passion, and neither speak to Adriana again, nor look at her again in any intimate way. Well, in that case, how could she reconcile my apparent generosity with the demeanor I should henceforth maintain toward her? Along this line I would be forced to use her revelation of the theft—a revelation which I repudiated at the first

opportunity—as a pretext for breaking off relations with her! But was there any sense to that? No, there were but two possibilities: either I had lost the money—in which case, why was it I did not have the thief arrested, but, instead, withdrew my affection from her as though she were the guilty one? Or else, I had really gotten my money back—in which case, why should I cease loving her?

A sense of nausea, disgust, loathing for myself seized upon me. At least I should be able to explain to her that there was no whit of kindness involved in the matter, that I took no legal steps, because I couldn't, because I couldn't! . . . Well, I would have to give some reason. . . . I couldn't let it drop like that! . . . Perhaps I had stolen the money myself in the first place! Yes, she might easily draw that conclusion! I could let her think so! . . .

Or I could explain that I was a fugitive from persecution, a man in trouble, compelled to drop out of sight and so unable to share his lot with a wife!

Lies, lies, nothing but lies for that poor innocent creature!

Well, the truth, perhaps? A truth so improbable that even I who had lived it could hardly believe it so! Could I tell her such an absurd tale, such a disordered fancy? And in that case, to avoid one more lie, I should have to confess that I had told nothing but lies hitherto! That would be all a truthful explanation could possibly amount to! And it would neither make me less of a scoundrel nor ease her suffering!

I do believe that in the state of exasperation and disgust in which I then found myself, I would have made a clean breast of everything to Adriana, if, instead of

sending Silvia Caporale, she had come to my room herself to tell me why she had gone back on her promise not to talk.

For that matter, I knew already from what Papiano had said. Miss Caporale added that Adriana was inconsolable.

"Why should she be?" I asked with forced indifference.

"Because," the piano teacher answered, "she does not believe you have found the money!"

It occurred to me just then—an impulse quite in harmony, moreover, with my mood at the time—that one way out of it would be to make Adriana lose all respect for me, let her think me a hard, selfish, treacherous trifler whom she could not love. That would serve me right for the harm I had done her! She would be terribly hurt for a while to be sure, but in the end she would be the gainer.

"She doesn't believe it? How is that?" And I smiled shrewdly at the Caporale woman. "Twelve thousand lire, signorina! That much money doesn't grow on every bush! Do you think I would be as cheerful as I am, if I had really lost it?"

"But Adriana said . . ." she tried to add.

"Nonsense! Plain nonsense!" I continued, interrupting. "It's true that . . . look . . . I did suspect for a moment; but I also told Miss Paleari that I could not believe such a thing possible. . . . And, in fact . . . well, you say it for me . . . what reason could I have for claiming I had recovered the money if I hadn't?"

Miss Caporale shrugged her shoulders:

"Perhaps Adriana thinks you may have some reason . . ."

"But I told you no! And no it is!" I hurriedly interjected. "Remember it was a matter of twelve thousand lire. . . . Now a lire or two would not have made much difference. . . . But twelve thousand! . . . My generosity is not so great as all that. . . . She must be thinking I'm a hero! . . ."

When Silvia Caporale went away to report to Adriana, I wrung my hands, and dug my teeth into my knuckles! Was that the way to go about it—as it were, trying to pay her for her crushed illusions in my regard with the money they had stolen from me? Could any thing be meaner, cheaper, more cowardly? I thought of her in the next room there, raging at me probably, despising me, not being in a position to understand that her grief was my grief too. Yet, that was the way it had to be! She had to hate me, despise me, as I hated and despised myself. What was more, to increase that hatred and contempt, I would now be very courteous toward Papiano—her enemy—as though to compensate him in her eyes for the suspicions I and she had had of him. And my thief himself would be disconcerted, confounded, even to the point of thinking me perhaps a lunatic. . . .

What was left? Could I do anything worse? Yes . . . one thing! We were going to the Giglios'. That very day I would begin paying open court to Pepita Pantogada!

"That will make you scorn me more than ever, Adriana," I groaned, writhing on my bed. "What else, what else, can I do for you?"

Shortly after four o'clock old Anselmo, in formal dress, came and knocked on my door.

"I'm all ready!" I called, rising and throwing on my coat.

"Are you going that way?" asked Paleari in astonishment.

"Why?" I asked.

But then I noticed that I had on a Scottish cap with a visor, that I usually wore about the house. I put it into my pocket and reached for my hat, while Anselmo stood chuckling and chuckling to himself. . . .

"Where are you going, Mr. Paleari?" I asked, as he suddenly turned away.

"Why, I'm as daft as you are," he answered, pointing to his feet. "I was going in my slippers! Just step into the other room, Mr. Meis. Adriana is there and . . ."

"What, is she coming too?"

"She didn't want to," called Paleari, moving along toward his quarters. "But I made her change her mind! . . . She's in the dining-room, with her things on . . ."

With what cold and severe reproachfulness Miss Caporale stared at me as I entered the room! Caught in a hopeless passion herself, she had been so often comforted by this simple inexperienced little child! Now that Adriana understood what the world was like, now that Adriana had been hurt, Silvia rushed grateful and solicitous to her rescue. What right had I to make such a good and pretty little child unhappy? As for herself, Silvia—neither good nor pretty—men might have some excuse for being mean to her! But not to Adriana! Not to Adriana!

This she seemed to be saying with her eyes as she invited me to survey the wreckage I had made in the

life beside her. And in truth, how pale, how bravely pale, Adriana was! Her eyes were red with weeping.

What an anguished effort it must have cost to get up and dress to go out for an afternoon—with me!

* * * * *

Notwithstanding the state of mind in which I went on the party, the personality and the home of the Marquis Giglio d'Auletta aroused some curiosity in me. I knew the reason for his residence in Rome: he saw no possible way to the restoration of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies except through the victory of the Temporal Power: once the Pope could recover his capital, the Kingdom of Italy might go to pieces, and in the upset . . . who could tell? The Marquis was not strong on prophesying! One thing at a time! Attend to the job in front of you! For the moment—war, without asking or giving quarter, and in the Clerical camp! And his salon, in fact, was the rallying place of the most intransigent prelates of the Curia, and the most valorous laic champions of the Blacks.

On that day, however, we found no other callers in the vast and sumptuous drawing-room. Conspicuous, in the middle of the floor, was a painter's easel with a canvas about half finished: it was Minerva, Pepita's lap-dog, a black little beast, stretched out on a white sofa, her pointed snout resting on her two front paws.

"By Bernaldez, the Spanish artist!" announced Papiano gravely, as though he were making an introduction that required an unusually low bow from the rest of us.

Pepita Pantogada came in, followed, shortly, by her governess, Signora Candida.

On previous occasions, I had seen these two women in the semi-darkness of my room; now, under a full light, Miss Pantogada seemed a different woman, not as a whole perhaps, but in respect of her nose. What? Had I ever seen that nose before? I had imagined it as a small upturned affair, impudent rather than not. But no: it was strong, robust, aquiline.

A stunning girl, all the same! Dark complexion, flashing black eyes, coal black hair, wavy and shiny. Thin lips, sharp, keen, sarcastic, bright red. Painted, almost—rather than fitted—on her slender shapely form, a dark dress with white lace-work.

The soft placid beauty of the blond Adriana faded under the brilliancy of this superior glow.

And, bless me, at last I solved the mystery of that steeple on Signora Candida's head. It was . . . it was first of all: a magnificent blondish wig of waved hair; and pitched, if I may say so, on the wig, a sort of tent —a broad light-blue kerchief, or mantilla, of silk, that was drawn down and knotted coyly under her chin. A magnificent frame, truly for such a plain, lean, angular, washed-out face, which inches of rouge and powder and—so forth, could not improve.

Meantime Minerva was barking so vociferously that we were hardly able to exchange formalities. But the poor doggie was not barking at us. She was barking at the easel, and at the white sofa, which she remembered as instruments of torture apparently. The protest and lament of an incensed soul! Yelp! Get out of this room! Yelp! Get out of this room! But the easel stood there unperturbed on its three legs; so Minerva retreated slowly on her four, barking, showing her

teeth, returning to the charge, retreating again, in terrible commotion.

A fat chubby body on four over-slender legs, Minerva was not a pretty dog. Many times grandmother, I imagine: there was no sparkle in her eyes, and her hair had turned gray in places. On her back, just forward of her tail, was a bare spot, resulting from the habit she had of scratching herself furiously on the rungs of chairs, on the corners of book-cases, on anything hard and sharp that would reach that particular trouble.

This I knew already, however.

Finally Pepita seized Minerva by the nape of the neck and tossed her at Signora Candida, scolding:

"*Cito!*" which was Pantogadese for "*zitto*"—"shut up!"

And Don Ignazio Giglio d'Auletta came hurrying in. He trotted—so round-shouldered he bent almost double—to an arm-chair he always sat in next to a window, fell into his seat, brought his cane to rest between his two legs, and finally sighed a heavy sigh and smiled a wan smile at his mortal weariness. His face, clean-shaven, shrunken, furrowed all over with deep vertical wrinkles, was of a corpselike pallor, in contrast with his gleaming, ardent, almost youthful eyes. Down over his cheeks, his temples, and the sides of his head, thick shags of hair trickled like tongues of wet ashes.

Speaking in an obstrusive Neapolitan sing-song, the Marquis welcomed us with great cordiality, asking his secretary to continue showing me the mementos of which the room was full—all testimonials of his fidelity to the Bourbon dynasty. Here was a small framed picture, as I took it to be, curtained by a green cloth which bore, in letters of gold, the legend: *NON NASCONDO:*

RIPARO. ALZAMI E LEGGI (I conceal not, but defend: lift me and read!). The Marquis asked Papiano to take down the picture and bring it to him. It was not a picture at all, but a letter (framed under glass) through which Pietro Ulloa, writing in September, 1860 (among the last gasps of the Two Sicilies, that is) invited the Marquis Giglio d'Auletta to assume a portfolio in the Cabinet (which was destined never to take office). In the margins was a transcript of the Marquis's acceptance, a ringing document, the latter, branding with infamy those men of prominence in the realm who, in the moment of supreme danger and anguish for their Sovereign, with the filibusterer Garibaldi hammering at the gates of Naples, declined to shoulder the responsibilities of Power.

As the old Marquis enunciated these documents aloud, he became so wrought up that I could not help admiring him, though everything he said offended my sensibilities as an Italian. He too, besides, had been a hero after his fashion; as I learned from a story he told in comment on a fleur-de-lis in gilded wood, that was also on show in the parlor there.

It happened on the fifth of September, 1860. The King was leaving the Royal Palace in an open carriage attended only by the Queen and a few gentlemen of the court. On the *Via di Ghiaja,* the carriage was held up by a jam in the traffic in front of a pharmacy which bore the sign of the lilies-of-gold. A ladder running up to the side of the building from the middle of the street was the cause of the congestion. Carpenters were at work on top of the ladder, removing the lilies from the front of the shop. The King called the Queen's attention to that act of cowardice on the part of the drug-

gist, who in more peaceful times had been only too glad to vaunt his royal brevet as an honor to his store. Well, he, the Marquis d'Auletta, happened to be passing at the moment; and in a rage of indignant loyalty, he ran into the shop, collared the offending pharmacist, pointed to the King out in the street, spat in the man's face, and went away, brandishing one of the fallen lilies as a trophy: *"Viva il Re!"*

The Marquis was as proud of that old shop-sign as he was of this Golden Fleece, his keys as a Gentleman of the King's Chamber, his trappings as a Chevalier of Saint Gennaro, and all the other decorations on display in the drawing-room under two full length portraits of their Majesties Ferdinand and Francis Second.

As soon as I could, I broke away from Papiano and Paleari to execute my base design: I approached Pepita Pantogada.

It did not take me long to see that the young lady was in a very bad humor with a case of nerves. She first wanted to know what time it was:

"Quattro e meccio? Four firty? Vary well! Vary well!"

That she was not overjoyed to find it was "four firty" I gathered from the tone of the "vary well's," and from the voluble and—in the circumstances—bad-mannered tirade, on which she then launched out, against Italy in general and against Rome in particular—Rome so stuck up over its blessed "glories of the Past?" The Colosseum? What was the Colosseum? They had a Colosseum, *también,* in Spain, just as big and just as old—"and we don't swell up and burst every time we walk by it. Pile of dirty stone, *piedra muerta,* anyhow!"

"If you want to know what a theatre is, come to Spain and see one of our *Plazas de Toros*. And your old paintings! Why—I'd rather have this picture of Minerva here, that Bernaldez is poking along trying to finish in time for Kingdom Come!"

Yes, that was it! Pepita wanted that picture and she wanted it right away. It was "four firty" and Bernaldez had not appeared! She fidgeted around on her chair, rubbed her nose, opened and closed her hands, with her eyes fastened on the drawing-room door.

At last the butler announced Bernaldez; and the painter came into the room, panting and perspiring as though he had had the run of his life. But Pepita's attitude at once changed. With a flounce she turned her back on him and stared the other way, affecting an air of cool and collected indifference. Bernaldez went over and shook hands with the Marquis, bowed to us each in turn and then approached Pepita, speaking in Spanish and begging pardon for his tardiness. Pepita now boiled over, and when she spoke, it was in a torrent of Pantogadese:

"First of all, you speak Italian, since these people do not know Spanish, and I think it bad manners for you to use Spanish with me. In the second place, I care not for you, for your picture, for you come late, for your excuse, for nothing!"

Bernaldez did the best a fellow could do in such a case: he smiled nervously, he bowed chivalrously; finally he asked if he might resume work on the picture since there would be still an hour of light.

"As you say!" she answered in the same manner. "You paint the picture without me, or you rub it all out—it is one to me!"

Bernaldez bowed again, and turned to Signora Candida who was still holding the dog Pepita had thrown into her arms.

Poor Minerva's hour of torture was beginning again; but her suffering was as nothing compared to that of her executioner. To punish Bernaldez for being late, Pepita began to flirt with me and with an ardor that seemed to me excessive even for the purpose I had in view. A glance in Adriana's direction warned me of the extent of that poor girl's distress—it could not, for that matter have been much greater than Minerva's, nor Manuel Bernaldez's, nor mine. I could feel my face flaming redder and redder, as though I were intoxicated with the anger I knew I was arousing in that unfortunate young man. I had no pity for him, but just a fiendish delight in his torment. My thoughts were all for Adriana. She was being hurt to the quick: why should he not be also? In fact, I seemed to feel that the more he suffered, the less her pain might be. Certain it was that the air in the room was becoming electric with a tension that must soon reach the breaking point.

It was Minerva who brought on the storm. Since Pepita was sitting with her back to the easel and the sofa, the little dog was not being cowed as usual by her mistress's sharp eyes; so the moment the painter turned to his canvas, Minerva would cautiously rise from her "pose," and first one paw forward and then another, eventually get her nose and head under the cushions, as though she were trying to hide. At any rate, when Bernaldez would turn around again, he would find himself confronted not by his pose, but by the hind legs and the curly upturned tail of his unwilling subject.

Several times already Signora Candida had put Minerva in place again. Bernaldez fuming with rage meantime, and commenting under his breath on a word of endearment that he would catch every now and then from Pepita's conversation with me. I say, under his breath. His remarks were not always inaudible, exactly; and more than once I was tempted to inquire:

"Did you say something, Mr. Bernaldez?"

Finally his patience gave out and he exploded:

"Miss Pantogada, will you at least be kind enough to keep this little bitch of yours where she belongs?"

"Vitch? Vitch? Vitch?" cried Pepita, jumping to her feet and turning upon the poor painter, livid with rage; "you dare call my dog a vitch?"

"But a dog doesn't mind coarse language!" I was unhappily prompted to observe.

I didn't realize, at the moment, that a man in Bernaldez's state of excitement might catch an allusion where none in the least was intended. I was not criticizing his choice of words, nor did I even think that he might take my "dog" as referring to himself. But he broke out:

"My language is no business of yours, monsieur!"

Under his fixed aggressive provoking stare, I felt my temper begin to rise. I could not help replying:

"I must say, Signor Bernaldez, you may be a great painter . . ."

"What's the matter?" piped the Marquis, noticing our hostile mood.

Bernaldez dropped his brush and his palette and strode over till his face was a few inches from mine:

". . . a great painter? . . . Say what you were going to say, monsieur!"

". . . a great painter, yes . . . but your manners aren't all they might be; and besides, you frighten the dog!"

There was a sting of contempt in the tone of every word I uttered.

"Yes," said he, "but we'll see whether it's only four-legged dogs that are afraid of me!" And he drew back.

Pepita now began to shriek hysterically, and she had technique enough to fall fainting into the arms of Papiano and Signora Candida.

In the confusion I turned my attention, naturally, to the girl, whom they were easing on a sofa. But I suddenly felt a clutch on my arm: Bernaldez was upon me. I was just in time to parry the blow he had aimed at my face, and to throw him back with a hard push. Again he rushed, barely missing my cheek with a furious stroke. It was my turn to attack: but Papiano and Paleari had jumped between us. Bernaldez was backing out of the room, shaking his fist at me:

"Consider yourself thrashed, monsieur. Consider yourself thrashed! I am at your service at any time! The people here know my address!"

The Marquis was standing in front of his chair, trembling and shouting. I was struggling to get free from Paleari and Papiano to pursue my assailant. The Marquis at last was able to make himself heard:

"You are a gentleman," said he. "You must send two of your friends to settle your accounts with this fellow. To me, he must explain how he dared attack a guest of mine in my house!"

I was quivering with excitement, and barely had breath enough to wish the Marquis good-day. I left at once, followed by Papiano and old Anselmo. Adriana

remained to assist in reviving Pepita, whom they had carried to another room.

Now I had the privilege of getting down on my knees to the thief who had robbed me and asking him, along with Paleari, to be my second. To whom else could I appeal?

"Me?" asked Anselmo in honest stupor, "Me? Why, my dear Mr. Meis, you must be joking? Me? Never in the world. Why, I know nothing about such business. . . . All nonsense, anyhow! Really now, isn't it?"

"You must!" I retorted energetically, not choosing to begin an argument at just that moment. "You and Mr. Papiano will be so good as to go at once to that gentleman's house . . ."

"I? I? Not a single step, my dear boy! Ask me anything else—at your service! But just this? No sir! Not my line, in the first place! And anyhow—nonsense! Nothing serious! Little rumpus like that! Why so excited?"

"No, you're wrong there!" interrupted Papiano, noticing my furious rage. "It is a serious matter! Mr. Meis has a right to demand satisfaction. In fact, he's in honor bound to demand satisfaction. He's got to fight! He's got to fight! . . ."

"So you, then!" I said. "You go, with a friend of yours . . ."

I had not expected a refusal from Papiano; but he opened his arms in a gesture of apologetic helplessness.

"You know how I should like to help you out . . . but . . ."

"You won't?" I stormed, stopping in the middle of the street.

"Wait! Let me explain, Mr. Meis!" he answered humbly. "Just see! . . . Listen! . . . Notice the fix I'm in! Remember I'm bound hand and foot—secretary, servant, slave . . . of the Marquis . . ."

"What's that got to do with it? The Marquis himself . . . don't you remember?"

"Yes, I know . . . but tomorrow? A Clerical! And the Party! . . . His private secretary mixed up in a duel! The end of me, I can tell you! And besides—that little wench, there . . . didn't you get the point? Head over heels in love with Bernaldez! . . . Tomorrow, they kiss and make up! . . . And then where do I stand, eh? The end of me! So sorry, Mr. Meis . . . but try to understand my position . . . just as I say . . ."

"So you're both going to ditch me!" I answered, at my wits' end. "I don't know another soul here in Rome . . ."

"But listen, there's a way, there's a way!" Papiano hastened to advise. "I was going to suggest. . . . You see both my father-in-law here, and I, would find it difficult . . . impossible, in fact. . . . You are right, no question of that! You're right! Every reason to see it through! Can't overlook a matter like this. . . . Well, you just apply to two officers in the army. . . . They can't refuse to represent a gentleman in an affair of honor. . . . You go to them, explain how it all happened. . . . They often do such favors for people not known in town . . ."

We had reached the door of the house.

"So you won't! Very well!" I said to Papiano. And I turned on my heel without another word, walking away aimlessly, my brain reeling from my over-wrought emotion.

Again the thought of my crushing, my annihilating impotence had taken possession of my whole consciousness. Could a man in my circumstances fight a duel? Could I never get it through my head that I could no longer do one single blessed thing? Two army officers! Excellent! But, just as a starter—two very proper questions: "Who was I?" "Where did I come from?" No: the plain simple fact: people could spit on me, slap my face, thrash me with a whip: and I could ask them to lay on a little harder, please, but, for heaven's sake, to be quiet about it! Two army officers! And let me give them just the least wee little inkling of my real status—well, in the first place, they wouldn't believe me, and who knows what they might suspect? In the second place, I would be as badly off as with Adriana: if they did believe, they would suggest I come to life again; since a dead man—what's the use?—had no standing vis-à-vis of the code of honor!

So I could swallow—a good appetite to you!—the insult of Bernaldez as I had swallowed the theft of Papiano; slink away with my dignity wounded, my courage challenged—yes, with my face slapped—slink away like a coward, out of sight, into the dark again, the dark of an intolerable future where I would be an object of hateful loathing even to myself. Future, indeed? Could there be any future? How could I go on living? How endure the sight of myself? No, enough of this, enough of this!

I stopped, everything whirling dizzily about me, my legs giving way at the knees. A sinister impulse rose suddenly in my heart, giving me a cold shiver of horror from head to foot.

"But before *that*," I said to myself, my brain ram-

bling, "before *that,* why not try? If I should succeed. . . . But try anyhow . . . just to get back a little of my own self-respect! If I should succeed . . . not quite such a craven coward in my own eyes . . . and what's there to lose by trying? Why not try?"

I was a few blocks away from the *Caffé Aragno.*

"There! There! Catch as catch can! The first one I come to!"

In my blind agony, I went in.

In the outside room, around a table, sat five or six artillery officers; and when one of them noticed me standing there, pale, wild-eyed, hesitating, I bowed to him slightly, and with faltering voice began:

"I'm sorry . . . excuse me . . . might I have a word with you?"

He was a beardless young chap, hardly graduated from the Academy, it seemed to me. He rose, and came over toward me, answering me courteously:

"What can I do for you, Signore?"

"Why, it's this way—may I introduce myself? Adriano Meis! I am a stranger in town. I have no friends here. I've had trouble . . . a point of honor . . . I need a couple of seconds . . . I don't know whom I could ask. . . . If you and one of your friends . . ."

Surprised, perplexed, the man stood looking at me for a time; then turning to his comrades, he called:

"Grigliotti!"

Grigliotti was a lieutenant of the upper numbers, with an upcurled mustache, a monocle crammed willy nilly into an eyesocket, and smooth, well-massaged cheeks. He got up from his seat, still talking to the men at the table (I noticed he spoke with "r's" that were really "w's") and stepped our way, making a

slight somewhat constrained bow to me. The moment I saw which man Grigliotti was, I felt like saying to my cadet: "Not that man, please! Not that man!" But, as I afterwards recognized, no one else in the group could have been so well qualified for the task in hand as he. The articles of the code of chivalry he knew from A to Z.

Such a line of talk as he gave me about my case, and all that I must do! I was to telegraph, I forget exactly what—to a certain Colonel, state my grievance, fix the main points clearly, and then go in person to see him—*ça va sans dire*—see the Colonel, that is, precisely as he, Grigliotti, had done once—he was not yet in the army at the time—when something similar had happened to him—in Pavia, it was. Because, in these matters of honor, you see, laws of chivalry . . . and so on, and so on, till my head was a whirl of articles, precedents, courts of honor, and "points well established in practice."

I had not liked the man from the moment I set eyes on him. Imagine how I felt now when confronted with this dissertation on chivalry! Finally I could endure the strain no longer, and I exclaimed impatiently:

"But, my dear sir, that's all very well. You're quite right, I dare say; but how will a telegram help in my present situation? I am all alone here in a strange city, and I want to fight a duel, understand, right away, tomorrow if possible; and without so much nonsense. What difference does all this stuff make to me? I mentioned the matter to you gentlemen in the hope—well, excuse me—in the hope that I could get somewhere without all this—all this fussing,—there! . . ."

My outburst provoked an answer from Grigliotti in the

same tone, and we were soon engaged in what amounted to a brawl, both talking at the same time and at the top of our lungs. But at a certain moment loud guffaws of ridicule from the officers about me brought me up short. I turned, and hurried away, my face aflame with indignant humiliation, as though I had been whipped with a lash.

Where could I hide? The laughter of those soldiers seemed to pursue me as I fled, my hands to my head, my brain in utter confusion. Should I go home? No, I shuddered at the thought of that. I kept on walking, walking, straight ahead, frantically. At last I noticed that I had slackened my pace; and then finally I stopped, to catch my breath, to rest a little; for I had no strength left to sustain the stinging smart of that ridicule which kept pulsing through me in waves of frenzied vengefulness.

I say that I stopped. I did stop; and I stood some moments without moving, my mind gradually becoming a blank. Then I began walking again; but now I was strangely relieved, all feelings of bitterness gone from my mind, a curious stupor replacing them.

Here was a shop window bright with its display of wares. I approached and studied the objects with a meticulous absorbing interest.

The lights went out. The stores all along the street were closing.

Yes, they were closing for me, eternally! People were going home, leaving me alone, a solitary wanderer on deserted streets, all doors and windows closed, all lights extinguished—silence and solitude for me, eternally!

I moved along.

As the city went to sleep, life itself seemed to recede

from about me, as though it were something remote, intangible, without meaning or purpose.

Had the sinister intention matured spontaneously within me? I do not know; but at last, involuntarily, guided as it were by that inner determination, I found myself on the Margherita Bridge, leaning over the parapet and gazing terror-stricken down into the black swirling stream.

"Down there, in that water?"

I shuddered. . . .

But it was not with fear! It was a violent outburst of anger, an uprising of all my instincts of life in ferocious hatred against those who were now bringing me here to the end they had assigned me back in the Flume of "The Coops" at Miragno. Yes, those women: Romilda and the widow Pescatore! They had brought me to this pass. I would never have thought of feigning suicide to get rid of them! And yet now, after two years of living like a ghost in the illusion of a life beyond the death they had wished upon me, here I was—dragged by the collar to executing their sentence upon myself! They were right after all! I had really died like the corpse they found! They were free of me—though I was not free of them!

And I rebelled. Could I not get even with them somehow, instead of killing myself?

Suicide? How could a dead man—hah, hah!—a dead man commit suicide? A nobody commit suicide?

I straightened up, as suddenly everything seemed strangely lucid and clear to me. Get even with them! But what did that mean? It meant going back to Miragno, didn't it? It meant shaking off the lie that had throttled me! It meant coming to life again to

spite them, to chastise them, with my real name, my real personality, my very very real misfortunes? Ah yes . . . but my present fix! Could I cut loose from the present that easily? Could I throw aside my life in the *Via Ripetta* as one did a bundle of rubbish for which there is no further use? No, no! That I could not do! I knew I could not do so! So I stood there, in anguished bewilderment, uncertain as to a decision.

By chance I put my hand into my pocket and my nervous fingers came in contact with something which I did not at once recognize. With an angry twitch I pulled it out. It was the cap that I had always worn on my trains and about the house, the cap in which, to old Anselmo's delight, I had started out to make my call on the Marquis and which I had thrust into my pocket distractedly.

I was about to toss the thing into the water when, in a flash, an idea came to me. Something I had thought of long before on my trip from Alenga to Turin rose clearly to my consciousness.

"Here," I muttered almost involuntarily to myself, "here on the railing of this bridge . . . my hat . . . my cane. . . . Yes . . . just as they did on the bank of the mill-flume at Miragno. . . . There, Mattia Pascal . . . here, I—Adriano Meis. . . . Tit for tat! . . . I come to life again . . . to their undoing! . . ."

The joy that seized on me amounted to an exultant inspiring frenzy. Of course, of course! To kill myself —the self which they had killed, would be absurd, absurd! I must kill rather the ridiculous fiction which had tortured and tormented me for two long years! I must put an end to that wretch of an Adriano Meis, who, to live at all, had to be a coward, a liar, a worth-

less miserable outcast! Adriano Meis! A false name for a mannikin, with a brain of sawdust, a heart of rags, and veins perhaps of rubber, with colored water for a weak diluted blood! Away with such an odious fiction —drown him as they had drowned Mattia Pascal! Exactly: tit for tat! First their turn, and now mine! Adriano Meis, a ghastly life springing from a ghastly lie! Finish him then, with another falsehood just as gruesome!

And that was a way out of everything! What better reparation could I make to Adriana for the wrong I had done her? But . . . could I swallow the insult from that boor of a Spaniard? The coward— assailing me there by surprise, under conditions where a fight was impossible! Could I swallow it? I, the I that was really I, had not a trace of fear for the man. Of that I was sure. He had not insulted me. He had insulted Adriano Meis. Well, Adriano Meis could swallow anything. Of course he could: was he not killing himself?

Yes, that was the way, the only way, out. I was trembling from head to foot, as though I were really about to kill someone; but my brain was clear as crystal, my heart light with a sudden buoyancy that was almost gay.

I looked about me. Over in that direction, on the *Lungotevere,* someone must have noticed me standing on the bridge at that hour, a policeman perhaps, on lookout for just such tragedies. I had to make sure; so I walked along, first into the *Piazza della Libertà,* then along the river boulevard—the *Lungotevere dei Mellini.*

No one!

I retraced my steps; but before going out on the

bridge again, I stopped under a street lamp in the shadow of some trees.

My notebook!

I tore out a page and wrote on it in pencil; "Adriano Meis." Anything else? Well, my address, perhaps; yes, and the date! That would do! That would tell the whole story! Adriano Meis—his hat and his cane!

As for the rest—well, a few clothes, and a few books! I could leave them back at the house! Nothing much! The money left from the robbery I had with me.

I stole along the bridge, bending low behind the railing. My legs were shaking under me and my heart was all athrob. I selected the darkest spot over the river, took off my hat, slipped the note behind the ribbon, and set the hat with my cane on the broad stone top of the parapet. On my head I crammed the cap I so luckily had with me—the cap that had suggested to me the means of my escape; and keeping to the shadows, I moved stealthily away, sneaking along like a thief in the dark, not daring to turn my head.

XVII

Reincarnation

I REACHED the station in time for the Pisa express that left shortly after midnight.

I bought my ticket and found a corner seat in a second-class compartment. There I took my place at once, sitting with the visor of my cap pulled down over my eyes, not so much in fear of being seen as of seeing.

But I could see just the same, in my mind's eye: I could see the broad-brimmed hat and the cane lying there on the parapet of the bridge where I had left them. Already, at that very moment perhaps, someone was passing and would notice them; or perhaps, a policeman on patrol had found them and given the alarm at the station-house! And I was still in Rome! What might be the outcome? I could scarcely breathe in my anxiety.

But at last the train started, with a jerk. Thank Heaven! I was alone in the compartment! I sprang to my feet, raised my arms above my head, and as though a millstone had suddenly been removed from my chest, drew one long endless breath of relief. Ah! At last I was alive again—myself: Mattia Pascal. I could shout it out loud to everybody now: I, I, Mattia Pascal! I am not dead! Look at me: here I am: Mattia Pascal! Oh, no fear henceforth of self-betrayal! And I was

through with falsehood and deceit! Not just yet, to be sure—not, really, till I should reach Miragno! There I must first declare myself, have my status as a living person recognized, regraft my life to its buried roots.

What a crazy notion! The idea of ever supposing I could live apart from my original personality! And yet, and yet—see the way it goes: on my other journey, the trip from Alenga to Turin, I had thought myself just as happy as I felt now! Lunatic! "Freedom! Freedom!" So I had said—thinking of it as a liberation from all that had been! Freedom! Bah! A pretty freedom—with the leaden weight of falsehood on my shoulders—a leaden mantle for a ghost in Malebolge! Well, now I would be getting a wife back again, and that mother-in-law. . . . But hadn't I felt their presence just as keenly when a "dead" man? Now, at least, I was alive, and with some experience in warfare. We'll see! We'll see!

As I thought of the matter now, it seemed hardly believable that I could have cut myself off from society in such a frivolous, haphazard, nonchalant way, two years before. And I pictured myself as I had been during those first days, blissfully happy in my carefree world in Turin (a world of madness, I could see it was now!); and then, as I gradually became later on in my wanderings from town to town—silent, solitary, shut up in the enjoyment of what I then thought was happiness; then Germany, the Rhine, on an excursion steamer. . . . Was that a dream? By no means! Gospel truth! I had been there! Ah, had I been able to live on in that state of mind, traveling forever as a visitor to this life! But soon afterwards, at Milan . . . that poor puppy I had wanted to buy from the old

match-seller. . . . Yes, I was beginning to understand, even then. . . . And after that . . . ah, yes: after that!

In one leap, my mind was back in Rome. . . . I saw myself stealing like a ghost into my deserted house. Were they all abed, and sleeping? All except Adriana, probably! She would be waiting up for me to come home. Surely they must have told her I had gone off looking for two seconds, for a duel with Bernaldez. She had not heard me come in yet. She would be afraid, and in tears. . . .

I pressed my hands to my face as a violent pang clutched at my heart. . . . "Oh, my Adriana, my little Adriana!" I groaned. "And yet, for you I could never really be alive. Better therefore if you know that I am dead, that those lips are dead which once snatched a kiss from yours. Poor Adriana! Oh, try to forget me! Try to forget!"

What would happen in the house next morning, when a policeman would come to investigate my suicide? What reason, in their first stupefaction, would they give to account for it? The duel I was about to have? No, that would hardly seem convincing. Strange, to say the least, that a man who had never shown himself a coward, should kill himself rather than fight! Well then? Perhaps because I had not found my seconds? Nonsense! So then . . . who knows? . . . there was probably some mystery at the bottom of the strange life I led. . . .

Yes, yes, that conclusion was inevitable. Here I was, killing myself, without any apparent reason, without having betrayed the remotest intention of so doing. Oh, to be sure, I had been acting rather queerly—that mixup

over the money, first claiming it was stolen and then saying I had found it again. . . . But . . . "Do you suppose the money didn't really belong to him? Perhaps he had to pay it back to somebody, and was working up an excuse—saying they had stolen it . . . later on, repenting, and finally killing himself? You never can tell! One thing certain—he was a most mysterious man: never a friend to call on him, never a letter, at any time, from anybody . . ."

How much better it would have been, had I written something on that note—a word or two besides my name, my address, and the date—some reason or other for my suicide. . . . But at that time and in that place! . . . And what reason, if you come to that?

"Who knows what the newspapers will say," I thought, my mind jumping from point to point. "What a fuss they can make over this mysterious Adriano Meis! One thing I may be sure of: my cousin, Mr. Francesco Meis, of Turin, the assistant tax collector, will step forward to tell all he knows, and more too. They will follow that clue—and who can guess what will come of it? Yes, but the money—the money I ought to leave someone? Adriana saw all the bills I had. . . . Poor Papiano! A bee-line for the cabinet . . . only to find it empty! So then—lost? In the river on his body? What a shame! What a pity! How mad Papiano will be that he didn't steal everything at once! The police will take charge of my clothes and books. . . . Who will get them in the end! Oh, some little thing at least, for Adriana—just as a remembrance! What anguish for her now to look in at my deserted room . . . !"

So I rambled on from supposition to supposition, from

memory to memory, from fear to fear, as my train sped northward. I could not sleep from the tumult of emotions within me.

I considered it prudent to stop off for some days in Pisa to avoid any chance association of the reappearance of Mattia Pascal in Miragno with the disappearance of Adriano Meis in Rome, a relationship likely to occur to someone if the newspapers of the capital made any great feature of my suicide. At Pisa I could see both the morning and evening editions. If no particular mention was made of Adriano Meis, I would go on to Oneglia, before turning toward home, to try out on brother Berto the effect of my resurrection. But even to him I must avoid making the slightest reference to my residence in Rome, to my adventures there, and their outcome. The two years and some months of my absence I could fill in with fantastic stories of distant travels abroad. . . . And now alive again, I could take an honest pleasure in lying, bragging even of prowesses beyond those of Mr. Tito Lenzi, Chevalier of the Crown!

Fifty-two thousand lire left! Surely my creditors, supposing me to be dead, had helped themselves to the remaining title I had to "The Coops" and the mill. The sale of that property had probably realized enough to satisfy them after a fashion. No, they wouldn't trouble me any more. And I would take care to avoid messes in the future you may be sure! Fifty-two thousand lire! That amount of money in a place like Miragno. . . . Couldn't call it wealth, exactly . . . but a good comfortable living, and some to spare! . . .

On getting out of the train at Pisa, my first move was to buy a hat of the style and dimensions that the late Mattia Pascal had worn in his time; and my second

was to make for a barber-shop to get the long hair of that imbecile, Adriano Meis, off my head.

"A nice close clip, eh?" I suggested to the barber.

My beard had already come out a bit; and with my hair short, again, I was beginning to look natural—natural, with a bit of an improvement, perhaps: a little more sleek and natty, a shade more genteel. . . . For one thing, I had had my eye fixed. In that respect, I had lost one of the distinctive features of the late Mattia Pascal. Something of Adriano Meis there would always be in my face; but, for the rest, how like brother Berto I looked! . . . I should never have dreamed of such a close resemblance!

In order not to present myself in too evident transiency at a hotel, I bought a travelling bag, with the further thought that I could use it for the suit and overcoat I was wearing at the moment. I would have to get a brand new outfit. Small chance there would be that my wife, at Miragno, had kept any of my clothes this length of time. I bought a ready-made suit in a store and kept it on, proceeding to the Hotel Neptune with my new valise.

I had been at Pisa once as Adriano Meis, and on that occasion I had stopped at the Hotel London. Now there was nothing in the city to interest me as a sight-seer. Fatigued with my night's journey and the nerve-racking experiences of my previous day, when I had quite forgotten to eat, I took a quick breakfast and went straight to bed.

I slept till late afternoon; and when I awoke it was with a horrible sense of depression and anguish. I had passed that critical day in deep unconscious slumber—but how had things been going back there in the Paleari

household? Confusion, dismay, the morbid curiosity of strangers, suspicions, hypotheses, insinuations, fruitless investigations; my clothes and my books fingered and stared at with the consternation which the exhibits in a tragedy always inspire! And I had been sleeping! And I would have to wait in my present impatience till the following morning to see what the Roman newspapers had to say.

Since I dared not go on to Miragno nor even as far as Oneglia I would have to remain for two, three, who knows how many days, in a fine condition—dead, in Miragno, as Mattia Pascal; dead in Rome as Adriano Meis!

Having nothing else to do, I thought I would take my two corpses to walk about the streets of Pisa. And it was a pleasant diversion, I can tell you. Adriano Meis, as I said, knew Pisa like a book and he insisted on playing guide and barker to Mattia Pascal; but the latter, with so many troublesome things on his mind, was in a detestable humor for sight-seeing; and he kept shooing away that annoying ghost in the blue glasses, the long coat, and the broad-brimmed hat:

"Ugh! Back to your river, sir! Don't you know you're drowned?"

But then I remembered that Adriano Meis, on his walks through those self-same streets two years before, had been just as bored with the importunities of Mattia Pascal, whom, with the same ill-humor, he had tried to shove down under the water again in the mill-flume of Miragno. As for me, I thought it better not to decide between them. O white and shining Tower of Pisa! You might lean to one side if you chose! But I? Erect, impartial, between the two impulses tugging at me!

The next morning, when they got plenty good and ready, the papers from Rome began coming in. I will not aver that on reading what they said of me my mind was put quite at ease: that was too much to hope for. But I was glad to note that my suicide was treated everywhere as one of the routine items in the daily news.

They all said much the same thing: that a hat, a cane and a laconic note had been found on the Ponte Margherita; that I came from Turin; that I was an eccentric individual; that no reason for my desperate action could be established. One notice, indeed, went so far as to suggest that some "matter of the heart" was probably involved, since "the man Meis came to blows the day before with a young Spanish painter in the house of a gentleman well known in Clerical circles." Another reported that I had been "recently troubled by financial worries." Nothing of consequence, in short.

But an afternoon sheet, that liked an emotional note in all its articles, more unctuously expatiated on the "surprise and sorrow of the family of Chevalier Anselmo Paleari, executive-secretary, retired, under the Department of Education, with whom the man Meis resided, and who had learned to respect him for his distinguished bearing and his kindly regard for those about him." (Thank you!) The same article also reported the challenge I had received from "the Spanish painter, signor M. B." and hinted that my suicide was due to "some secret and hopeless passion."

So I had killed myself for Pepita Pantogada!

Well, better that way! Better that way! Adriana's name had not been dragged into the affair, nor was there any reference to the theft. The police of course

would pursue their investigations; but on what clues?

I could start for Oneglia without fear.

* * * * *

On calling at Roberto's town house, I found that he was at his farm in the country for the vintage. My joy on returning to my old haunts, which I had thought I would never see again, may well be imagined; though I was not a little disturbed by my eagerness to hurry; by my fear of being recognized by some old acquaintance before I had a chance to surprise my relatives; by my foretaste of the emotion they would probably feel on suddenly finding me alive again in their presence. In fact, my excitement soon reached such a pitch that I was hardly my normal self. Everything seemed to be swimming before my eyes, and my blood ran cold. Would I never get there?

When I rang at the gate of the pretty villa which Berto had annexed along with his wife, I had the sensation of being back at last in a real world.

The butler answered the bell.

"Come right in, please!" said he, standing aside to hold the gate open. "Who shall I say is calling?"

My voice failed me quite; but with a smile that I forced, to conceal some of my agitation, I managed to stammer:

"Why . . . er . . . say . . . say it's . . . it's a friend . . . an old friend of his . . . from a long way off . . . yes . . . that will do . . ."

At least the butler must have thought I was tongue-tied; but he showed me to a seat in the parlor, setting my valise on the floor near the hat rack.

I was now beside myself with impatience and antici-

pation, laughing, panting, gazing around at the bright, comfortably furnished room in which I was sitting. Would Berto never come?

Suddenly I heard a sound in the doorway through which I had entered.

It was a little child, perhaps four years old, with a toy watering-pot in one hand and a toy rake in the other. He was looking at me with all the eyes he had. A thrill of indescribable tenderness swept through me. My little nephew! Berto's oldest boy! I leaned toward him affectionately and motioned to him with my hand. But he was scared and ran away as fast as his legs could carry him.

But then I heard another door open and close. I rose to my feet, my eyes dim with tears, a convulsive grip, half laughter and half sob, catching at my throat. Roberto was before me.

"With whom have I the hon . . ." he began.

"Berto!" I cried, opening my arms. "Berto, don't you know me?"

At the sound of my voice, Berto turned white as a sheet, rapidly passed a hand across his eyes and forehead, and tottered as though about to fall:

"Wh-wh-why! Wh-wh-why-y!"

I rushed forward to support him, but he drew back in sheer terror.

"But it's I—Mattia! Don't be afraid! I'm not dead! See? Touch me! It's I, Roberto! I was never more alive! There now, there now, there now!"

"Mattia! Mattia! Mattia!" my poor brother at last was able to cry, not yet ready quite to believe his eyes. "You? What in the world? . . . Oh! My brother! Mattia! Mattia!"

His arms were about me squeezing me till it hurt. I broke down and stood weeping like a child.

"But . . . tell me . . ." Berto at last murmured through his sobs . . . "Tell me! Tell me!"

"Well, it's I, don't you see? Back again! Not from the other world, oh no! I never left this disgusting one! Brace up, now! And I'll tell you!"

But Berto would not let go of me. His hands clutching at my arms, he looked up into my face, in utter bewilderment:

"But . . . there . . . at the mill . . ."

"It wasn't I! . . . I'll tell you. They got it wrong. I was miles from Miragno at the time; but I heard about it, as you probably did, through the papers . . . my suicide in the Flume . . . .";

"And it wasn't you? . . ." Berto asked in a more normal voice. "What have you been up to?"

"Playing dead! But don't make too much noise. I'll give you the whole story, later on. I can't, right now. I'll say this much: that I knocked about, here and there, thinking myself happy at first, you know. Then . . . well . . . from a number of things, I decided I had made a mistake, that playing dead was not all it was cracked up to be. So here I am! I've come to life again!"

"Crazy, crazy, crazy . . . I always said so!" exclaimed Roberto with a smile. "But this is beyond me! You can't begin to understand how I feel, Mattia, my boy! You! My dead brother! You! Mattia!—Why, I can't believe it! Let me look at you! What's wrong? There's something different about you!"

"There is!" said I. "I had that peeper of mine attended to!"

"Ah yes, that's it! That's what puzzled me! I couldn't quite make you out! I don't know . . . your voice, all right . . . but I looked at you and the longer I looked. . . . Well! Well! Well! . . . But . . . come upstairs and surprise my wife . . . Oh . . . but say . . . you . . ."

He stopped suddenly and looked at me, his face filling with dismay:

"You are going back to Miragno?"

"Of course I am . . . this afternoon!"

"So you don't know, then?"

He pressed his hands to his face and groaned:

"You rascal! What have you done! What have you done! Don't you know that your wife . . . ?"

"Dead?" I exclaimed in a paroxysm of mingled fear and eagerness.

"Worse! Worse!" said he. "She is . . . she's married!"

I was dumfounded.

"Married?"

"Married! To Pomino! I got the announcement! A year or more ago!"

"Pomino? Pomino? Married to Ro . . ." I stammered. But a bitter, bitter laugh seemed to form inside me and gurgle up slowly from about my middle. At last it reached my throat and my lips. I laughed thunderously.

Roberto stood looking at me, afraid perhaps that I might really have lost my mind.

"You are glad?" he asked.

"Glad?" I bellowed. "Glad is no name for it!" And I shook him by the arm. "This news caps the climax of my good fortune!"

"What are you talking about?" exclaimed Roberto, almost angrily. "What good fortune? But you say you are going there . . ."

"Of course I am! This minute!"

"But don't you understand? You've got to take her back!"

"I've got to take her back? What do you mean?"

"You bet you have!" Roberto insisted. "This second marriage will be annulled and you will be obliged to take her back."

It was my turn to fall from the clouds; and the bump I received on landing was not a pleasant one.

"What are you trying to tell me?" I cried fiercely. "My wife gets married again and I . . . Oh say, come now! That can't be so! What crazy law . . ."

"It's just as I'm telling you," Berto affirmed. "Wait! My wife's brother is right here. He's a lawyer, and he'll explain the situation better than I can. Come along . . . or rather, no, you wait here. . . . My wife is not very well. Perhaps it would be better not to surprise her. . . . I'll break the news gently. . . . So you just sit down, eh?"

But he clung to me till he was well outside the door, as though he were afraid that if he released me for a second I might disappear again.

Left to myself I began going round and round the room like a caged lion.

"Married again! And to Pomino! . . . Of course, just like him! . . . The same wife, this time! . . . He, to be sure, fell in love with her first. . . . And she . . . well, why not? Rich, and wife of a Pomino! . . . And while she was getting another husband here at home.

. . . I, in Rome. . . . And now I take her back! . . . That's a good one!"

Shortly Roberto came hurrying in at the head of a procession. I was so much upset by this time that I hardly acknowledged the welcome his wife and her family were giving me. Berto noticed my distraction, and appealed to his brother-in-law on the point I had so much at heart.

"But what kind of a law do you call that?" I interrupted after a time. "Are we governed by Turks?"

"That's the law!" the man answered with a smile. "Roberto is right. I can't quote the article word for word, but the case is provided for in the Code. The second marriage becomes null and void on the reappearance of the first spouse."

"So then," I stormed ironically. "I must take back unto myself a woman, a woman, who, to common knowledge, has been functioning for a year or more as wife to another man, said man . . ."

"But through a fault of yours, if I may say so, my dear Mr. Pascal!" the lawyer rejoined with another smile.

"Why my fault?" said I. "Why my fault? That estimable lady first makes a false identification of a poor devil who has fallen into a pond. Then she hurries to take out a license to marry another man! And it's my fault? And I must take her back again?"

"You must," replied the lawyer; "and you are responsible since you, Mr. Pascal, did not see fit, within the time prescribed by law for contracting a second marriage, to correct the mistake your wife made, a mistake, which, I grant you, may well have been in bad faith. You accepted her false identification, and took

advantage of it. Oh, as for that, notice now—I am not saying you did wrong. On the contrary, I think you acted quite properly under the circumstances. I am surprised, rather, that you seem inclined to go home again and get mixed up with the stupid laws regulating such matters. If I were you, I would never show up again."

The coolness of this young graduate of the law schools, the pedantic cocksureness with which he talked, at last began to anger me.

"That's because you don't know what it all means!" I replied with a shrug of my shoulders.

"Why," said he, "I can't imagine a greater piece of good luck than the one which came to you."

"You're welcome to try it for yourself," I answered, turning to Roberto without excusing myself.

But trouble was waiting for me with my brother as well.

"By the way," Berto asked me, "how did you get along all this time?"

And he rubbed his thumb with his forefinger to suggest "money."

"How did I get along?" I answered. "That's a long story! I haven't time or patience for it now. But I had plenty to live on, and I have some still. I hope you don't think I'm coming home because I'm hard up!"

"So you're really going to Miragno?" Berto persisted. "Even after what I told you?"

"I certainly am," I exclaimed. "Do you think that after all I've been through I intend to go on playing dead? Not by a long shot! No sir! I'm going to get my papers straightened out, see that the record is clear,

feel myself alive again, alive and kicking—even at the cost of taking back my wife. By the way, is the old lady still alive—the widow Pescatore?"

"Ah, that I couldn't say," answered Roberto. "You understand that after your wife married again. . . . But so far as I know she is . . ."

"You give me cheerful news," I remarked. "But never mind! I'll square accounts with her. I'm not the chap I once was, you know. But I do hate to do a favor to that fool of a Pomino by taking her off his hands!"

A general laugh! The butler came in to announce that dinner was served. There was no refusing, though I was so impatient to get on I scarcely tasted my food. But afterwards I noticed that I must have eaten well. The animal in me was awakening to the prospect of imminent combat!

Berto was all for keeping me with him at least for that one night, offering to go on with me the following morning. He was keen to witness the effect of my sudden swoop down upon the peaceful household of Pomino. But I could not think of such a thing. I insisted on proceeding alone that very night and without more delay.

I took the eight o'clock train and in half an hour was at Miragno.

XVIII

The Late Mattia Pascal

IN my impatience and my rage—I know not which was greater—I ceased to care whether anybody recognized me or not before or after I got there. I took just one precaution: a seat in the first class. For that matter, it was dark, and my experience with Berto reassured me: convinced as everybody was of my fateful death two years before, no one would ever dream of taking me for Mattia Pascal.

I leaned out of the car-window, hoping that the sight of familiar scenes would divert my thoughts to less violent emotions; but this served only to intensify both my anger and my impatience. In the moonlight I made out the hills back of "The Coops."

"The wretches!" I hissed. "Over there. . . . But now! . . . "

In my surprise at the unexpected news from home, I had forgotten to ask Roberto ever so many things. The farm and the mill! Had they been sold? Or were they still in the hands of a receiver? How about Batty Malagna? And Aunt Scolastica?

Was all that only two years and a half—thirty months—before? It felt more like a century! So many things had befallen me, it seemed life at Miragno must have been just as exciting. And yet, nothing much had

happened, probably, except Romilda's marriage to Pomino, commonplace enough in itself, though now my sudden return from the dead might make it appear unusual!

Where would I go, when I got there?

And where were they living?

Certainly not where I used to live. My humble habitation as a two-lire-a-day man would never do for Pomino, rich as the only son of a wealthy sire. Besides, Pomino, who was a sensitive fellow, would not have felt quite at home among so many reminders of me. Doubtless he had gone to live with his father in the *palazzo!* And imagine the widow Pescatore in those surroundings! What airs she would put on! And that poor old devil, Gerolamo Pomino First—so timid, so gentle, so retiring! Bet he's having the time of his life in the claws of that old harpy! A real run for his money! For neither the old man nor his gosling of a son would ever have the courage to kick her out! And now . . . the goat as usual! I take her off their hands!

Yes, there's where I would go, to the Pomino mansion; and even if they weren't there, I'd find out from the janitress or somebody . . .

Oh, my quiet sleepy old home sweet home! What a shock you'll get tomorrow when you hear I'm alive again!

There was a bright moon that evening; and all the public lights were off as usual. The streets were quite deserted, since at that hour almost everybody was at supper.

In my great excitement I was hardly aware that I had legs at all. I walked as on thin air, my feet

scarcely touching the ground. I cannot describe the emotions I felt. They reduced to something like a great Homeric laughter, shaking spasmodically about my diaphragm, unable to find a way out. I am sure that had I turned it loose, it would have blown the houses over from the force of its explosion.

I was at the Pomino place in no time; but to my surprise I found no one on hand in the sort of dog kennel on the driveway where the old janitress used to live.

I knocked.

For some moments no answer came. In the meantime my eye had a chance to fall on a piece of mourning crêpe, now bleached and dusty, which seemed to have hung exposed to the weather there for several months. Who had died? The widow Pescatore? Cavalier Pomino? One of the two undoubtedly! More likely the old man! In which case, I would find my two doves cooing up on the first floor in the grand suite—already settled in the "palace." I was too impatient to wait. I opened the front door and ran up the stairs, three steps at a time.

On the first landing I met the janitress coming down.

"Cavaliere Pomino?" I asked.

From the astonishment with which the old mud-turtle looked at me, I understood that the District Inspector of Education must have been dead a good long time.

"Young Mr. Pomino—Gerolamino!" I corrected, resuming my ascent.

I couldn't quite understand what the old woman was muttering to herself; I know simply that at the top of the stairs I had to halt to catch my breath. The door to the Pomino apartment was in front of me.

"They may be still at dinner!" I reflected philosophi-

cally, though in a flash. "All three eating, without the least suspicion! In a few seconds, I will have knocked on this door and their lives will be topsy-turvy! . . . Look! Here in my hand rests the fate in store for them!"

I took the bell rope in my hand; and as I pulled it, I listened, my heart leaping with excitement. The house was absolutely still. In the silence I could barely hear the distant tinkle of the bell.

All the blood rushed to my head and my ears began to ring, as though that faint tinkling which had been swallowed up in the silence were clanging furiously inside my brain.

In a few seconds, I started violently. On the other side of the door I heard a voice, the voice of the widow Pescatore:

"Who's calling?"

I could not, for an instant, utter a sound. I pressed my fists to my chest to keep my heart from breaking through. Then with a husky hollow voice I answered, syllable by syllable:

"Mat-tia-Pas-cal!"

"Who?" called the voice within.

"Mattia Pascal!" I answered, deepening my voice still further.

Certainly the old witch was scared out of her wits: for I heard her patter off down the hall, as though the Devil were after her.

I could imagine what was taking place in the dining-room. The man in the house would be sent out, Pomino, the courageous!

However, I had to ring again—gently, gently, as before.

Pomino threw the door wide open, and there I stood, erect, my shoulders back, my chest thrown forward.

He recoiled in terror. I strode upon him with a cry:

"Mattia Pascal! From the other world!"

Pomino collapsed on the floor, and sat there, his weight resting on his hands, his eyes staring with fright and bewilderment:

"Mattia! Y-y-you?"

The widow Pescatore came running out with a lamp in her hand. At sight of me she gave one long piercing scream. I slammed the door to with a kick, and caught the lamp before it could fall from her hands.

"Shut up!" I hissed into her face. "Do you really take me for a ghost?"

"Alive!" she gasped, pale as death, her hands clutching wildly at her hair.

"Alive! Alive as they make 'em!" I answered with ferocious joy. "You swore I was dead though, didn't you! Drowned—out there! . . ."

"Where did you come from? she asked in absolute terror.

"From the Flume, you witch!" I replied between my teeth. "Here's the lamp, up close! Look at me! Who am I? Do you recognize me? Or do you still think I'm the man they found in the Flume?"

"It wasn't you?"

"Bad 'cess to you, she-goat! Here I am, alive! And you, Mino, what are you sprawling there for? Get up! Where's Romilda?"

"Oh, oh, oh!" groaned Pomino, jumping to his feet. "The baby! . . . I'm afraid. . . . She's nursing! . . ."

"What baby?" said I.

"Our little girl!"

"Oh, the murderer! The murderer!" shrieked the Pescatore woman.

I was unable to answer, the effect of this latest piece of news was still so strong upon me.

"Your little girl? A baby, to boot? Well now that, my dear sir . . ."

"Mamma, go in to Romilda, please!" begged Pomino.

But it was too late. Romilda was already out in the hallway, her dressing gown unbuttoned at the top, her baby nursing, her hair awry, as though she had hurriedly risen from a bed. The moment she saw me she cried:

"Mattia!"

And she fell fainting into the arms of her husband and her mother.

They dragged her away—considerately leaving me standing there with their baby in my arms! For I had run to the rescue also.

With the lamp now gone, the hallway was almost pitch dark. But there I stood holding that frail acrid-smelling bundle from which a tiny little voice came, blubbering through unswallowed milk. Alarmed, bewildered, not knowing what to do next, I was clearly conscious only of the shriek from the woman who had once been mine, and who now—precisely, ladies and gentlemen—was mother to this child who was not mine, who was not mine—Mine? Ah mine, she had hated in its poor little time! Mine she had never loved! So I now—no, no, a thousand times no, I would have no pity on this intruder, nor on them either! She had looked out for herself, all right! She had married again: while I . . . I . . .

But the faint whimper kept coming from the bundle on my arms . . . What could I do to stop it? "Hush,

little one! Hush, little one! 'At's a daisy! 'At's a daisy!" And I began patting the infant on her tiny back, and tossing her gently to and fro. The bleating grew fainter and fainter and at last was still.

Pomino's voice rang through the hallway:

"Mattia! The baby!"

"Sh-h-h-h, you donkey! Don't wake her up again!"

"What are you doing with her?"

"Eating her raw! What do you suppose I'm doing with her? They chucked her at me. Now I've got her quiet. God sake, don't wake her up on me now! Where's Romilda?"

Slinking up to me, suspicious and fearful, like a dog watching its puppy in the hands of its master, Pomino answered:

"Romilda? Why?"

"Because I want to have a word with her!" I replied gruffly.

"She's fainted, you know!"

"Fainted? Nonsense! We'll bring her to!"

Pomino cringed in front of me, blocking my path:

"Oh please, Mattia! Listen . . . I'm afraid . . . How in the world! . . . You, here, alive! Where have you been, where have you been! Oh! . . . Listen: couldn't you talk with me instead?"

"No!" I thundered. "My business is with her. Who are you, anyway? You don't count around here!"

"What do you mean, I don't count!"

"Very simple! Your marriage is null and void on the return of the first spouse!"

"Void? And how's that? And the baby?"

"The baby! The baby!" I muttered fiercely. "In less than two years after my death—married and with

a baby! Shame on you! Hush, little one! Hush, little one! 'At's a daisy! Mama's coming soon! Here, show me the way, you! Is this the room?"

The moment my nose crossed the threshold of the bedroom, the widow Pescatore advanced upon me like a ravenous hyena. I had the baby on my left arm. With my right, I gave the old woman a solid push.

"You just mind your business! Here's your son-in-law here! If you've any fuss to make, make it with him! I don't know you!"

Romilda was weeping piteously. I bent over her, holding out the baby:

"Here, Romilda, you take her! Tears? Why do you feel so bad? Because I am alive? You wanted me dead, didn't you! Well, look at me! Look! Alive or dead?"

She tried to raise her eyes through her tears; and her voice breaking with sobs, she murmured:

"Oh, Mattia! How is this? You! What . . . what have you been doing?"

"What have I been doing?" I snickered. "You ask me what I have been doing! It's clear what you've been doing! You've married again—that ninny there! And you've had a baby! And now, 'Oh, Mattia, what have you been doing?' "

"Well?" groaned Pomino, his face in his hands.

"But you, you, you! Where have you been? You ran away! You played dead! You deserted your wife! You . . ." It was the widow Pescatore, coming at me again with her arms raised.

I seized one of her wrists, and twisted it over till she was in my power:

"Listen, old lady!" I then lectured. "You just keep

out of this; for if I hear another word from you, I swear I'll lose all pity for this dunce of a son-in-law of yours, and for that little baby there, and I'll . . . I'll invoke the law! The law, understand? You know what the law says? This marriage is null and void on the return of the first spouse! I've got to take Romilda back to me! . . ."

"My daughter . . . back to you? You're crazy!" the old woman cried in terror.

But Pomino was reduced to zero:

"Mother dear! Mother dear!" he begged. "Please be quiet, please be quiet, for the love of God!"

And she let loose on him—fool, imbecile, milk-sop, ninny, coward—good for nothing but just to stand there bleating like a sheep!

I could hardly hold my sides from laughing.

"Dry up, now!" I commanded, as soon as I could catch my breath. "He can have her! He can have her! I wouldn't be crazy enough to take on a mother-in-law like you again! Poor, poor Pomino! Mino, old boy! Forgive me if I called you an ass! But, as you hear, your mother-in-law agrees with me, and I can assure you Romilda—our wife—! thought the same of you in the old days. Yes, she used the very same words for you—fool, donkey, dunce, and I forget what else! Didn't you, Romilda! Tell the truth! Oh now, dearie me! Don't cry any more! Come, come, smile for us, won't you? It's bad for the baby, you know! I'm alive, that's all, you see. And I feel like being gay! 'Cheer up!' as a drunken man said to me one night! Cheer up, Pomino! Do you think I'd really have the heart to leave your baby without a mamma? Not on your life! I already have a son without a papa. Ever

think of it, Romilda? We're quits! I have a son, who is the son of Malagna; and you a daughter, who is the daughter of Pomino. Four square! One of these days we'll make them man and wife! Anyhow, you'll not feel so bad over that boy now. . . . So let's change the subject! . . . How did you and your mother ever come to see me in that poor devil they found in the Flume? . . ."

"Oh, I did too, you know!" said Pomino, with a touch of anger. "And so did everybody else! Not just Romilda and her mother!"

"You had good eyes, I must say! Was he really so much like me as all that?

"Your build! Your hair and whiskers! Your clothes —black . . . and besides, you had been gone so long!" . . .

"Deserting house and home, eh? As though they hadn't driven me to it . . . the old lady there! Ah, that woman! And yet, I was coming back, you know! Loaded with money! And then, as nice as you please —dead, drowned, in an advanced state of decomposition! Best of all—identified! Thank heaven for one thing: I've been having one good time these two years! While you people here—engagement, wedding, honeymoon, house and housekeeping, baby. . . . The dead are dead, eh? Long life to the living!"

"And now?" groaned Pomino, on pins and needles. "What about it now? That's what's bothering me."

Romilda got up to put the baby into its cradle.

"Suppose we step into the other room," I suggested. "The little girl's asleep again. Better not wake her up! We can talk in there!"

On the table in the dining-room the supper dishes

were still lying about. Trembling, wide-eyed, deathly pale, winking two cadaverous eyelids over two white glassy balls pierced in the middle by two small round black dots, Pomino sat in a chair rubbing his forehead, and mumbling as in a dream:

"Alive! . . . Alive! . . . How can we fix it? What's to become of us?"

"Oh, why worry about that?" I shouted impatiently. "We'll come to that in due season, I tell you!"

Romilda made herself presentable and eventually came to join us. I sat looking at her under the bright lamp light. As beautiful as she had ever been, I thought . . . even more bewitching than when I first met her!

"Let me have a look at you!" I said. "You don't mind, do you, Mino? What's the harm? She's my wife, too, you know—perhaps more mine, than yours! Oh, I didn't mean to make you blush, Romilda! See Mino squirming? But I'm not going to bite him! I'm not a ghost!"

"This is intolerable!" said Mino, livid with anger.

"He's getting nervous," I said, winking at Romilda. "Come now, Mino, old man, don't worry! I'm not going to cut you out again! And this time I'll keep my promise! Except—if you don't mind—just one . . . !"

I went over to Romilda and smacked a loud kiss off her cheek.

"Mattia!" shrieked Pomino desperately.

Again I laughed aloud.

"Jealous, eh?" I said. "And of me! Now that's hardly fair! There's something coming to me on grounds of prior right, if for nothing else. Anyhow, Romilda, just forget it all, forget it all. . . . You see,

in coming here . . . forgive me, won't you, Romilda . . . in coming here, I supposed, my dear Mino, that you would be glad to have me take her off your hands. . . . And the thought of doing so was not at all to my liking, I can tell you . . . for I wanted to get even with you . . . and I would like to still . . . but this time by stealing Romilda away from you . . . because I see you are in love with her and she . . . well, yes . . . she's a dream, a dream . . . the way she was years ago when we first . . . you haven't forgotten, eh, Romilda? . . . Oh, poor girl! I didn't intend to make you cry. . . . But they were good days, those old ones, eh . . . gone forever now? . . . But never mind! You have a little girl of your own . . . and let's forget all about such things. Of course, I'm not going to trouble you . . . what do you take me for? . . ."

"But this marriage . . . it's null and void?" cried Pomino.

"What do you care?" I answered. "That may be the law of it. But who's going to invoke the law? I'm not! I won't even bother to cancel my death certificate, unless I'm forced to by money matters. I'm satisfied if people have a look at me, know I'm alive and well, and see that I'm through with this playing dead—a death, which was a real one, I assure you. You were married publicly. . . . For a year or more you have been living publicly as man and wife. Such you will continue to be! Who's going to ask any questions about the legal status of Romilda's first marriage? That water has gone under the bridge. Romilda was my wife; now she's yours, and mother of a child of yours! A few days' gossip and everybody will drop the subject.

Am I not right, you miserable twice-over mother-in-law?"

The Pescatore woman, frowning, ferocious, nodded in the affirmative. But Pomino, more and more nervous, asked:

"But you're going to settle here at Miragno?"

"Of course! And I'll come once in a while to get a cup of coffee or sip a glass of wine to your health!"

"That you won't!" snarled the widow, jumping to her feet.

"But he's joking! Can't you see?" said Romilda, keeping her eyes away from mine.

I laughed aloud as I had before.

"You see, Romilda!" I jested, "they're afraid we'll begin making love again. . . . And it would serve them right. . . . However . . . let's not be too hard on poor Mino. . . . Since he doesn't care to have me in the house, I'll just walk up and down in the street, under your windows. . . . What do you say? A serenade, not too often, of course . . ."

Pomino was now stamping up and down the room in a veritable frenzy:

"Intolerable!" he cried. "This won't do! This won't do!"

All at once he stopped and said:

"You can't get away from the fact that . . . with you here . . . alive . . . she won't ever be my wife! . . ."

"Just you pretend I'm dead!" I answered quietly.

He began stamping up and down again:

"I can pretend no such thing!"

"Well, don't then! But do you think I'm going to disturb you—unless Romilda asks me to? After all,

she's the one to decide. . . . Say, Romilda, speak up now! Which is the better looking, he or I?"

"I am thinking of the law!" said Pomino almost in a scream.

Romilda looked at him anxiously.

"Well," I remarked. "As matters stand, it seems I'm the one who has more right to find fault than anybody. I've got to see my beautiful, my charming, my *quondam* better half and helpmeet living with you as your wife!"

"But Romilda—" exclaimed Pomino, "she isn't really my wife any longer!"

"Bosh!" I replied. "I came here to get even, and I let you off. I give you my wife! I guarantee not to annoy you. . . . And still you are not satisfied! Come, Romilda, get on your things. Let's be going . . . the two of us . . . on a honeymoon! We'll have a great time. . . . Why bother with this thing here? . . . He's not a man, he's a law-book. Why, he's asking me really to go and drown myself in the Flume!"

"No, I'm not asking that!" cried Pomino in utter exasperation. "But go away, at least! Leave town, live somewhere else, far away! And for heaven sake, don't let anybody see you! Because, I, here, with you alive . . ."

I rose and laid my hand gently on his shoulder to quiet him a little. I told him that I had already called on my brother at Oneglia, that everyone probably by this time knew, or that certainly by the next morning would know, that I had come to life again. Then I added:

"But you ask me to drop out of sight again, and live far away from here—play dead again in short! You

must be joking, my dear boy! Come, brace up—you play husband the best way you can, and stop worrying. Your marriage, come what may, is a solemn fact. Everybody will stand by you, especially since there's a little one involved. As for me, I promise, I swear, never to come near you, even for a puny little cup of coffee, even for the sweet, the exalting, the exhilarating spectacle of your blissful union, your devoted passion, your exemplary concord—all built up on my considerateness in dying! Ungrateful wretches! I'll wager not a one of you, not even you, Pomino—bosom friend of my boyhood—ever took the trouble to place a wreath, a bunch of flowers, on my grave there in the cemetery! . . . A good guess, eh? Tell the truth: did you?"

"You are having a good time with us, aren't you!" exclaimed Pomino, shrugging his shoulders.

"A good time? Nothing of the kind! I'm in deadly earnest. It's a question of a soul in Purgatory—no room for joking. Tell me! Did you?"

"No-o-o, I didn't. . . . I didn't have the courage to," Pomino murmured.

"But courage enough to run off with my wife behind my back, eh, you rascal?"

"Well, how about yourself?" Mino retorted with some spirit. "You took her away from me, didn't you, in the first place, when you were alive!"

"I?" I exclaimed in injured astonishment. "There you go again? Can't you get it into your head that she didn't want you? Will you force me to repeat that she thought you were a ninny, a fool, a nincompoop? Here, Romilda, come to my rescue: you see, he's accusing me of false friendship! . . . However, what does it matter, after all? He's your husband, so we'll have to

let it go at that. But it's not my fault . . . just admit that! I'll go myself tomorrow to pay a visit to that poor man, left there in the graveyard all by himself, without a flower and without a tear! Tell me, there's a stone at least on his mound?"

"Yes!" Pomino hastened to reply. "The town put one up. . . . Poor papa, you remember . . ."

"Yes, I know . . . he delivered the funeral oration. . . . If that poor man could have heard. . . . What's the epitaph? . . ."

"I don't know. Lodoletta made it up . . ."

"The Lark himself!" I sighed. "The poet laureate of Toadville! Did you ever . . . ! Anyhow, we can drop that subject too. Now, I should like to know how you came to marry so soon. . . . Not long didst thou weep for me, merry widow mine! Probably not at all, eh? But, for heaven's sake, can't you say a word to me, not one little word? Look, it's getting late . . . as soon as morning comes, I'll go away and it will be as if we had never known each other. . . . Let's not waste these few hours. . . . Come, answer me!" . . .

Romilda shrugged her shoulders, glanced at Pomino and smiled nervously. Lowering her eyes and staring at her hands, she then said:

"What can I answer? Of course I was sorry . . . I cried . . . !"

"And you didn't deserve it!" the widow Pescatore volunteered.

"Thanks, mother dear!" I replied. "But not so very much, eh? Just a little! Those pretty eyes of yours —they don't see very well, to be sure, when it comes to identifying people—but still, a shame to turn them red, eh?"

"We were left in a pretty fix," Romilda continued by way of extenuation. "If it hadn't been for him . . . !"

"It was nice of you, Mino!" I agreed. "But that rat of a Malagna . . . no help from him?"

"Not a cent!" the Pescatore woman said, dryly. "He did everything . . . !"

And she pointed to Pomino.

"Or rather, or rather . . ." Mino corrected. . . . "Poor papa . . . you remember he was connected with the Administration. . . . Well, he got Romilda a bit of a pension in view of the circumstances . . . and then, later on . . ."

"Later on, he consented to the wedding!"

"Oh, he never objected really! And he wanted us all here, with him. . . . However, two months ago . . ."

And Mino launched out on a narrative of his father's death, of the love the old man had for Romilda and the little girl, the tribute the whole town paid him on his passing.

I interrupted with a question about Aunt Scolastica, who had been such a favorite with old Pomino. The Pescatore woman, still mindful of the pan of dough plastered on her face by that terrible virago, hitched uncomfortably on her chair. Pomino explained that he had not seen her for two years, but that she was still alive, and so far as he knew, well.

"But what has been happening to you all this time?" he now asked. "Where have you been? What have you been doing?"

I told him all I could, avoiding people, places and dates, to show that I had not been idle those two years. And so we whiled away the hours far into the night,

waiting for the morning when I should publicly declare my resurrection. We were growing weary from lack of sleep and the strenuous emotions we had been experiencing, and it was a trifle cold besides. To warm us up a little, Romilda insisted on preparing coffee for me with her own hands. As she handed the cup to me, my eyes met hers, and a faint distant smile, touched with a wistful sadness, flitted across her lips:

"Without sugar, as usual, I suppose?"

What was it she caught in my gaze? At any rate she hastily looked the other way. In the cold pale glow of the early dawn, I felt a clutch of unexpected homesickness gather at my throat. I looked at Pomino bitterly.

But there the coffee was, steaming hot before me. The fragrance of it filled my nostrils. I took up the cup and slowly began to sip the delicious drink.

"May I leave my bag with you till I know where I'm going to live?" I asked Pomino finally. "I'll be back after it before long!"

"Why, of course, of course!" proffered Mino solicitously. "In fact, don't bother to come and get it. I'll have a man take it to you."

"It's not so heavy!" said I, with a sly look at Romilda. "And by the way," I asked, turning to her, "have you any of my things left, perchance?—shirts, socks, underwear?"

"No," she answered sorrowfully, with a gesture of helplessness. "I gave them all away. . . You understand . . . after such a tragedy . . ."

"Who could imagine you would ever come back?" exclaimed Pomino.

But I would take my oath that, at the very moment,

Pomino, skinflint that he was, had one of my old neckties on!

"Well, never mind!" I said, ready to take my leave now. "Good bye, eh? And good luck!"

I had my eyes on Romilda, but she refused to meet my gaze. I noticed only that her hand quivered as she responded to my clasp: "Good bye! Good bye!"

Once out in the street, I again felt lost—solitary, homeless, without a place to go or a purpose to realize—though I was back in my own native village, the haunts of my boyhood.

I began to walk, however, looking anxiously at the people I kept meeting. How was that? Would not a soul recognize me? And yet, I was the very same person! The least anyone might have remarked on noticing me was my extraordinary resemblance to the late Mattia Pascal! "If he had one eye a little out of true, you could take him for Mattia outright!"

But nothing of the kind. No one recognized me, because everybody had forgotten about me, ceased thinking of me at all! My presence aroused not the slightest curiosity, let alone surprise.

And I had been thinking of an earthquake, more or less, a sensation, a stoppage of traffic, the moment I appeared on the streets! In my great disappointment I felt a humiliation, a bitterness, a spite, that I could not now express in words, but which I then expressed by cutting, by refusing to approach, people whom I, for my part, recognized perfectly well—why not, after a few months' absence merely? Yes, I could now see what dying meant. No one, not a living soul, had a thought for me. I might just as well never have existed at all! . . .

Twice I walked the length of the main street of Miragno without attracting a glance from anybody. Hurt to the quick, I thought for a moment of going back to Pomino's and informing him that I did not like the bargain we had made. Why not take out on his hide my irritation at the insult my home town was offering me! But Romilda would never have followed me without constraint, nor did I, for the moment, have a place to take her. I ought to have a house ready at least for the girl I was eloping with! Next I decided to go to the Town Hall and have my name scratched off the registry of deaths; but on the way there, I changed my mind and headed for the Boccamazza Library.

I found in the old place I once had held my reverend friend, Don Eligio Pellegrinotto, who did not recognize me either, on the spot. To tell the truth, Don Eligio claims that he did know me from the very first, but that he wanted to hear my name and be absolutely sure before throwing his arms around my neck in tearful welcome. "You see," says Don Eligio, "it couldn't possibly be you! Well, you couldn't expect me to let myself go with a man who merely looked like you!"

Be that as it may, my first real greeting came from him; and it was a warm one, I can tell you. He insisted on dragging me back to the village by main force, to drive from my mind the bad impression the coldness of my fellow-townsmen had made upon me.

Having expressed myself so clearly on this latter subject, it would now be surely in bad taste to describe what happened, first in Brisigo's drug-store, and later at the Union Café when Don Eligio, prouder than he

had ever been in his life, presented me as one returning from the dead.

The news swept the town like wild-fire, and the whole population turned out to have a look at me and ply me with millions of questions.

"So it wasn't you they found in the Flume at 'The Coops'? Well, who was it then?"

I don't know how many times I was asked to answer that fool question! Yes, everybody, each in turn—as though they could not believe their eyes:

"So you're really you?"

"Who else?"

"Where'd you come from?"

"The other world!"

"What have you been doing?"

"Playing dead!"

I made up my mind not to budge from those three answers, and I left them all on pins with a curiosity that lasted for days and days.

And no better luck fell to my friend "the Lark" who came to interview me for the *Compendium*. To make me open up a little, he produced a copy of his journal dated some two years before—the number containing my obituary. I told him I knew the thing by heart and that the *Compendium* was widely read in the other world.

"In Heaven?"

"Of course not! In the other place! You'll see for yourself some day!"

Finally he mentioned my epitaph.

"Oh yes! And thanks ever so much! I'll drop around to the cemetery some afternoon and have a look at it!"

I will not bother to transcribe his feature of the next Sunday, which started off with a headline in big letters:

MATTIA PASCAL ALIVE

Among the few—besides my creditors—who did not show up to congratulate me was Batty Malagna. Nevertheless, as I was told, he had made a great fuss two years before over my cruel suicide. I quite believe it. He was as sorry then over my tragic death as he was now over my resurrection. I understand why, in both cases!

I found a home with my Aunt Scolastica, who insisted absolutely that I come to live with her. My queer adventure somehow had raised me in her estimation. I have the very room in which poor mother died, and most of my day I spend either there or here at the library with Don Eligio.

He is still very far from completing his inventory.

With his help I have finished my strange story in about six months. He had reread every word, but will keep the secret, as though I had revealed it to him under the seal of the Confessional. We have argued a good deal about the significance of my experiences; and I have often said to him that I still can't see what earthly good it is ever going to do anybody to know about them.

"Well, there's this, for one thing," says he. "Your story shows that outside the law of the land, and apart from those little happenings, painful or pleasant as they may be, which make us each what we are, life, my dear Pascal, life is impossible."

Whereupon I point out to him that I fail to see how that can be; for I have not regularized my life whether

in relation to the law of the land or in relation to my private affairs. My wife is the wife of Pomino, and I'm not quite sure who I am myself!

In the cemetery at Miragno, on the grave of the poor chap they found in the Flume, the stone still stands with Lodoletta's epitaph:

O'erwhelmed by Evil Fortune

Here lies of his own will

MATTIA PASCAL

Scholar Book-Lover Librarian

A Generous Heart—A Loyal Soul

May he rest in peace

Erected to his Memory by his Sorrowing Fellow Townsmen.

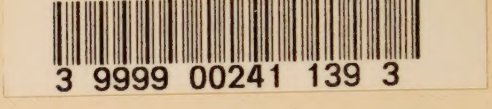
I have placed on the grave the wreath I said I would; and every now and then I visit the cemetery for the sensation of seeing myself dead and buried there. People often watch me from a distance, on such occasions; and sometimes somebody meets me at the gate and, in view of my situation, asks me:

"But say, who are you really, anyway?"

I shrug my shoulders, wink an eye, and answer:

"Why, what can I say? . . . I guess I'm the late Mattia Pascal!"

THE END


3 9999 00241 139 3

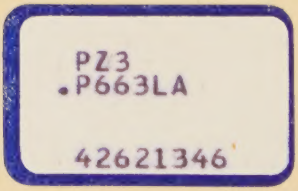
WITHDRAWN

No longer the property of the
Boston Public Library.
Sale of this material benefited the Library.

Boston Public Library

Copley Square

General Library


PZ3
.P663LA

42621346

The Date Due Card in the pocket indicates the date on or before which this book should be returned to the Library. Please do not remove cards from this pocket.